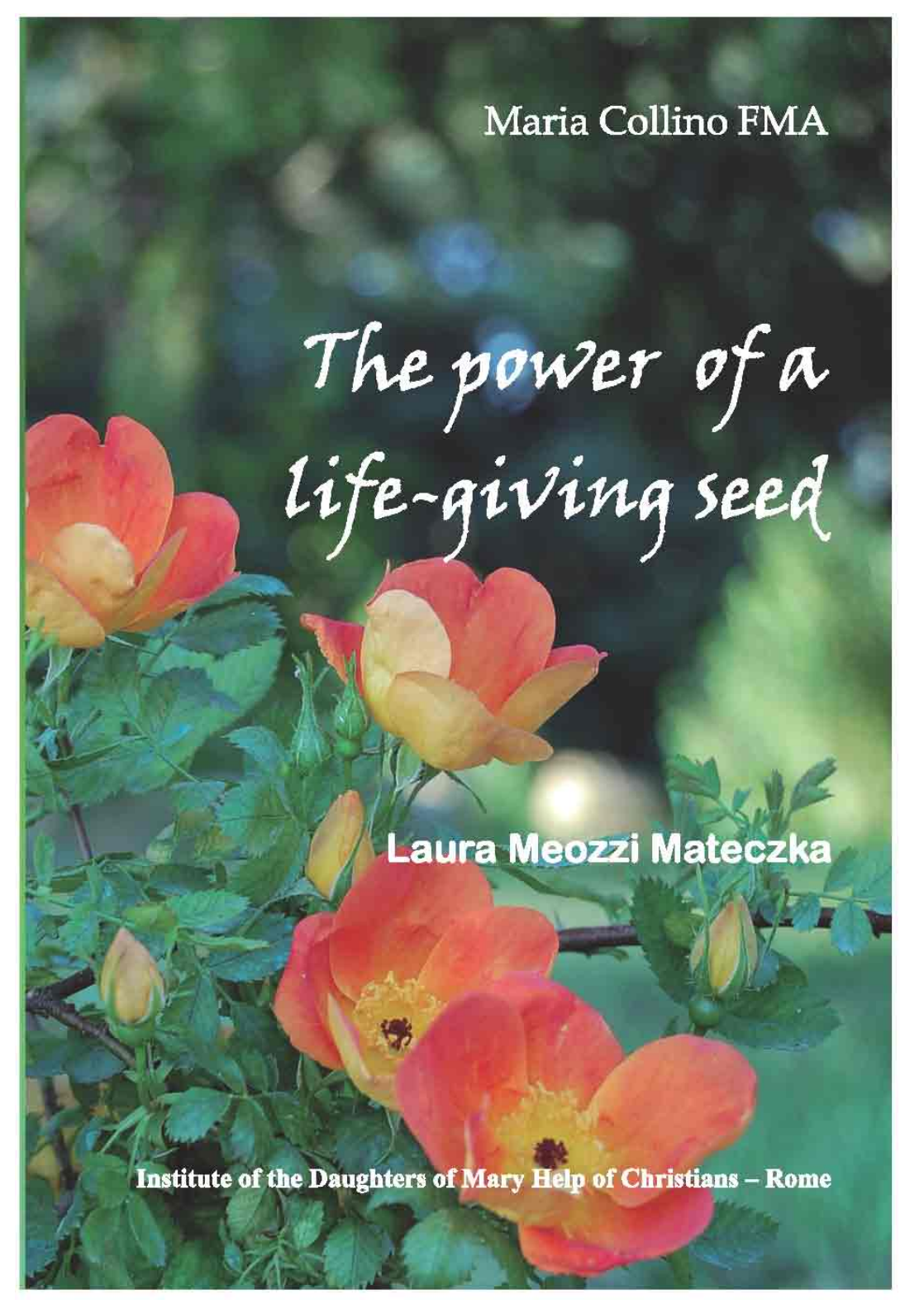




Maria Collino FMA

*The power of a
life-giving seed*

Laura Meozzi Mateczka

Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians – Rome

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Laura Meozzi *Mateczka*

Translated by the FMA English Translation Group (ETG)
from the original

La forza dirompente di un seme di vita:

Laura Meozzi *Mateczka*

by Maria Collino FMA

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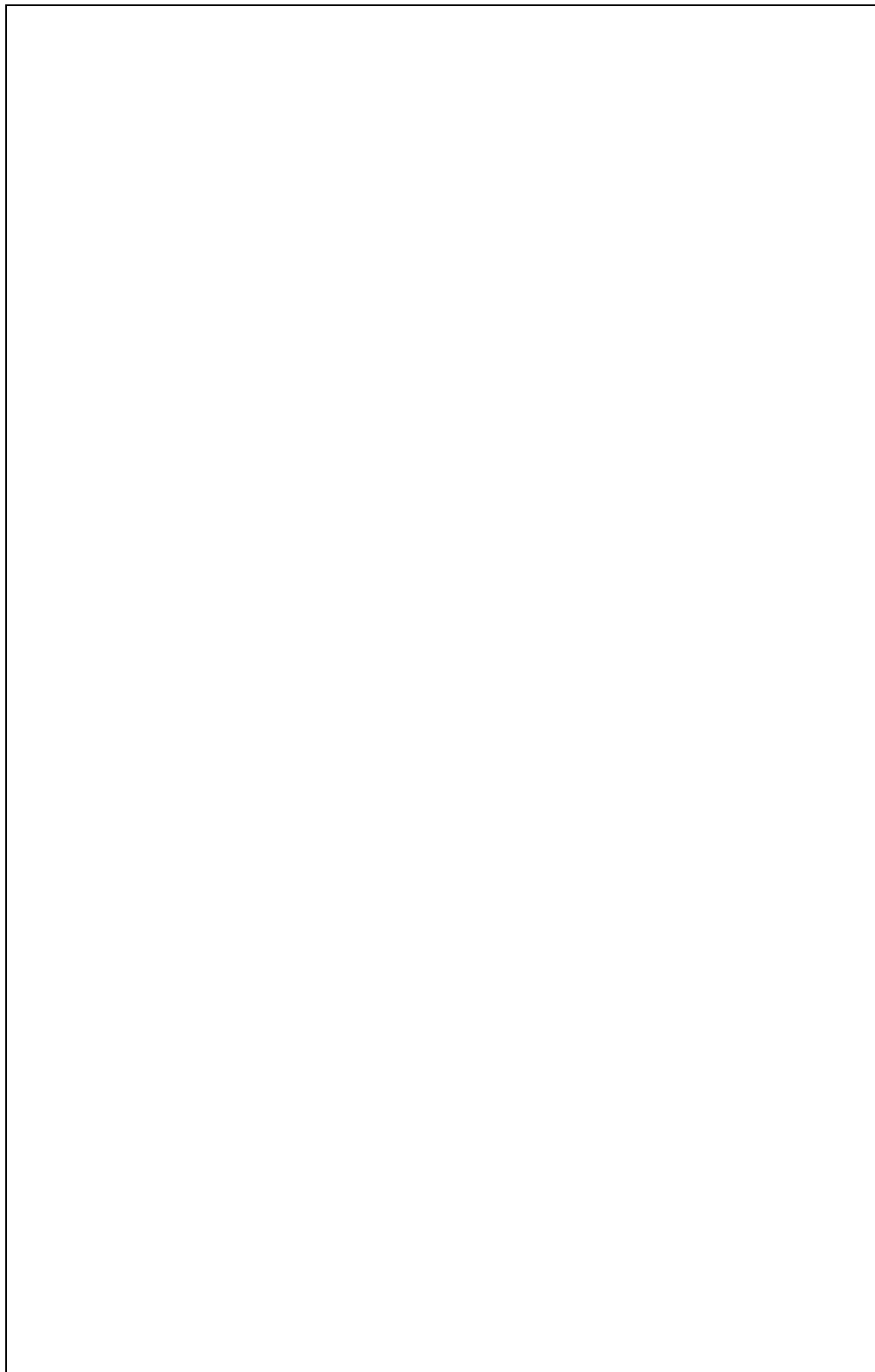
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*I cannot abandon
these dear Sisters.
Perhaps I will not have bread
to give them,
but until my tongue is torn out,
I will always have
a good word of comfort for them.*

Mother Laura





Contents

Presentation.....	8
Introduction to the English language edition	12
<i>Style and mechanics of the English translation</i>	13

Chapter One

ITALY: PREPARATION FOR A GREAT CALL	15
Family: a safe nest and a place of integral growth.....	15
Tabernacle, books, and a little white pony	18
An insistent voice in her heart	24
A journey into mystery	29
The intense life at Nizza Monferrato	34
Apostolic ministry in Italy	39
A precious mission as animator	50
Sr. Laura, “A Sicilian woman”	58

Chapter Two

POLAND: THE POWER OF A SEED IN A FRUITFUL FIELD.....	63
Don Bosco’s fingerprint in Poland	63
The Hill of Roses – perfumed roses among sharp thorns	67
Children: Lives stunted by suffering.....	78
Good Christians and honest citizens	89
A new living cell	95
Relaxing times in the fresh air	99
...and difficult days of sorrow	105
Stories of courageous women	108
The intense fervour of a growing harvest	115

Novitiate: the field of the future.....	118
A strong, growing presence	123
A thousand roofs... a single home.....	129
Life as an unrepeatable story	135
Empty pockets, but a heart of gold	140
Formation as daily bread.....	144

Chapter Three

THE PROVINCE IS BORN	159
In the name of the Virgin Mary	159
The devil's tail?.....	164
Deep, bright brush-strokes of suffering.....	169
A little hospital.....	183
Stories	187
Zofia Sowińska: a heart of gold in a volcano	192
Dynamics of everyday life	195
Geographical expansion.....	200
A time of light before descending into darkness	203

Chapter Four

THE LIFE-EATING MONSTER.....	206
The beginnings of the great destruction.....	206
Warnings of a dark future	212
A chronicle of blood and tears	217
Krynica: a refuge illumined by hope	223

Chapter Five

A TURN FOR THE WORSE	228
Humans treated like trash.....	228

The strength of love built on suffering	230
The forced diaspora: abandonment to God's Providence	233
FMA prisoners	238
1943-1945: one enormous freezing winter	243
Long trains travelling toward hope	249
Magnificent castles and bloodstained villas	254

Chapter Six

PEACE, BUT WHAT KIND OF PEACE?	261
Beginnings of a new found life	261
New foundations	265
Voices of profound humanity	272
An insidious persecution	279
The painful story of Sr. Zofia Sowińska	284

Chapter Seven

TOWARD ETERNAL LIFE	288
The slow, painful decline	288
Communication that sustains life	290
Passing of the baton	294
Toward the light and shadow of the Cross	299
Three hundred sixty-five days: the steep climb	303
On Calvary with the Lord	306
"She was a Saint"	315
SOURCES	322

Presentation

This biography, written in fidelity to the sources and with the immediacy of Maria Collino's style, brings the figure of Laura Meozzi to life with freshness and originality. The writer takes the readers into the adventurous life of this great Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, thus allowing them to enter with sensitivity and participation into the furrows of a dramatic story: that of the history of Europe in the period following World War I, the events of World War II, so terrible and devastating for Poland, and the difficult years of the post-war period. It was a history written with the blood of women and men of valour, but also characterised by an ordinary life marked by the sacrifice and love of so many people who, in dark and complex times, believed in the light of the future.

Laura Meozzi was one of them. A native of Florence from a family of noble origins, she was fascinated by the Salesian vocation. She left a life of comfort to become an FMA to dedicate herself to the education of the poorest young people.

Her 'yes' to God in the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians led her to spend her life in various parts of Italy, as far as Sicily, in the footsteps of Maddalena Morano another great FMA educator. Later, when she was no longer young, Laura was sent as a pioneer to Poland. It is thanks to her that the Salesian charism, in its feminine version, took root in that beloved land.

Vocations to the Salesian religious life flourished. A large group of young women was sent to Italy every year for their time of novitiate. This sending of candidates to the centre of the Institute continued even after the novitiate in Poland was opened. Contact with the origins and learning the language of the founders were key to the knowledge of the Institute's sources. In Poland, promising young women were asking to become part of the FMA religious family. They were well-prepared and willing to share a

life full of sacrifices, but one that was authentic and filled with values and, therefore, captivating.

Laura Meozzi was placed in charge of all FMA communities and works in Poland. Education, especially of girls and poor children, was the privileged setting for her educational mission. Foundations increased, and the number of Polish Sisters multiplied in a prodigious way.

The rampant German occupation and Soviet control, with their consequent religious restrictions, forced them to hide their identity as consecrated persons and, in some cases, led to their being sent to hard labour. However, the feeling of being in communion, knowing that they were loved by Mother Laura, *Mateczka* or ‘little mother’, as she was affectionately called, enabled them to continue to live with joy in their hearts, and to hope that one day they would be able to express their identity in the light of day.

Mother Laura felt the exile of the heart, and even more so that of her Sisters. She suffered the pain of not being close to comfort and encourage them, to share their experiences of pain, hardship, oppression, and dispersion. She suffered from the lack of news, especially of those FMA who had been deported to Siberia, but she did not become discouraged. She set out to find every possible way to maintain the thread of communion that continued to be vital even in the most acute oppression.

The FMA lost houses and works almost everywhere, but not hope, nor their sense of belonging and loyalty. At the end of the war, they came together again. None of them had abandoned religious life, though they did not know if and when the desired return would take place.

What was the secret of all this? It was *Mateczka*’s wise ability for accompaniment, the abundant seeds sown in hearts ready to receive her words, attracted by the witness of her life. Mother

Laura was a woman steeped in the Gospel and had the fire of the charism in her heart. She knew how to create communities everywhere that were willing to follow Jesus on the demanding path of the Gospel beatitudes. She ensured a solid formation for all, and instilled the love of Don Bosco's Preventive System to be applied even in extreme situations of children deprived of their childhood, orphaned, alone, dispersed, and abandoned.

She lived the Salesian charism in a land where the, “peripheries of existence”, as Pope Francis said, increased dramatically, especially as a result of foreign invasion and the organised extermination that took place during World War II.

Mother Laura's contemplative heart was the foundation for her tenacious activity by making herself all things to everyone. This made her tireless in reaching a community, encouraging it, supporting it, searching together for new forms of presence, and identifying ways of adapting education to the culture in the most varied contexts and different situations. She wanted the Poles to feel Polish, and that the Salesian charism would take on the nuances, and typical characteristics of Polish sensitivity.

For her, the encounter with one's neighbour was never a habit but was marked by empathy and confidence, even in the most diverse situations. She was convinced that in each person, one could find sensitivity and positive tendencies to be appreciated and cultivated, a newness to be discovered and developed. Every person was worth taking a chance on, and held the promise of goodness and hope.

In the community, she created an involvement that made everyone feel that they were in a family and this generated a sense of belonging and unconditional acceptance. With her, one could always feel at home.

It was a home that resounded with cheerfulness even when this was seasoned with the most austere poverty.

It was a home where Mary was present, one in which Sr. Laura lived the characteristic trait of motherhood in a sublime way. It was a home open to Providence, which was always ready to come to the rescue in often unforeseen ways.

The life of the Institute in Poland was made up of this solid spirituality, based on the witness of a woman who went before others in the journey of sanctity. For this reason, it opened new pathways.

We can still find *Mateczka* accompanying her Sisters as a tireless traveller on the way of hope and joy, with a deeply human face, whose features resemble those of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who was rich in mercy.

To all who will read this new biography of Laura Meozzi I hope that the author's enjoyable and direct style will help them to read with passion and gusto and to nourish hope also for our time.

Rome, May 24, 2016

Sr. Yvonne Reungoat fma
Superior General

Introduction to the English language edition

The English-language Translation Group (ETG) is an international group of FMA representing various parts of the English-speaking world. Mother Antonia Colombo, then Mother General of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and the general council, commissioned the group in 1998.

The principal aim of this group is to translate from Italian into English significant primary and secondary source material relevant to the history and spirituality of the FMA.

During General Chapter XXII, 2008, in the presence of Mother Yvonne Reungoat, current Mother General of the Institute, Mother Antonia Colombo, Mother General *emeritus*, and some members of the General Council, together with the provincials of the English-speaking provinces, the ETG was re-established.

The ETG is indebted to Sr. Maria Collino for compiling the Italian edition of *La forza dirompente di un seme di vita*, Laura Meozzi, Mateczka. The group would like to express their appreciation for the loving research that went into the writing of this book. This translation has been prepared with a view to making the life of this great pioneer and her many collaborators available to a wider audience especially in light of Project Europe.

A special word of thanks goes to Sr. Piera Cavaglià, Secretary General of the Institute, for her constant encouragement, assistance, and guidance. The group also thanks the FMA province of Chennai for their generosity in liaising with Chummy Printers, Vellore, and the FMA Institute.

Style and mechanics of the English translation

Throughout the text the ETG has tried to utilise words and terms that are acceptable wherever English is spoken. The group sought agreement on usage and chose that which was most understandable, if not always the most acceptable for a given country or region.

UK English spelling is used throughout the text. The USA date sequence and punctuation are used, that is, month / day / year. An exception to this rule has been made for the footnotes, where the European system has been used to avoid confusion. Footnotes containing documentary or bibliographical references have not been translated, while explanatory notes instead have been translated.

In lists, a comma has been inserted before the word *and*, as is the custom in USA English. In keeping with modern usage capital letters have been reduced to a minimum. Where necessary, and possible, the group chose to break long sentences into shorter ones. When the same word is used to signify different groups of people, lower and upper case are used to make the distinction. This occurs most frequently with the use of the word, sister. When this word is capitalised it refers to a woman religious, otherwise it refers to family members. The term *Don* in Italian is a title applied to priests. The editors have used *Don* for Don Bosco, as he is universally known, and have translated it as Father when naming all other priests. Throughout the text, as far as possible, proper names of people are left in their original language.

Inclusive language and terminology that respects the dignity of all peoples have been used where possible.

Terms such as superior, souls, have been replaced by words that are more commonly acceptable today (e.g. community animator, general councillors, people). At times, however, in order to respect the thought of the author some quotes using such terminology have not been changed. Lengthy quotes have been indented and personal correspondence italicised.

The FMA English-language Translation Group:

Sr. Isabel Geraghty (GBR)
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Chapter One

ITALY: PREPARATION FOR A GREAT CALL

Family: a safe nest and a place of integral growth

Italy had just been unified. Rome had been torn, more or less politely, from the Pope. Florence had ceased to be the capital of the Kingdom as it had been from 1865 to 1870.

Laura was born in a stately home on the banks of the river Arno in Florence, where a nobleman named Alessandro lived with his wife Angela Mazzoni and their two young children. It was January 5, 1873.¹

The newborn infant was three days old when she rode in a horse-drawn carriage for the first time. She was well-protected against the winter cold. She was brought to the Battistero di S. Giovanni, that baptistery which Dante called, “my beautiful St. John”². It was connected to the historic cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore, and with the admirable Campanile di Giotto. There, in that world centre of art and faith, the little child became part of Christ’s Church, receiving the divine seal that would mark her life forever.

The Meozzi family actually belonged to the parish of San Marco Vecchio, another church rich in history, dating from the twelfth century. It was initially called San Marco di Mugnone, because of a small stream that flowed nearby. It acquired the new name when it became necessary to distinguish it from the well-known church of San Marco built about a century later, along with

¹ The noble ancestry of the Meozzi family appears in the memoirs and testimonies only with brief references without further explanation, almost as if it were a given, through rapid terms such as a, “noble family”, “aristocracy”, and similar terms.

² Dante, *Inferno*. XIX 17.

the Dominican convent where Beato Angelico and Savonarola lived.

In the large baptistery Laura also received the names Cesarina, Stenia, Norina, Corinna, and Maria, perhaps to fulfil the requirements of an illustrious genealogy.

Time passed quickly. Laura was now a little girl of almost five, wearing beautiful dresses, smiling and playful. She understood many things. She did not miss the anguish that had entered at home: Her father Alessandro, was distraught; her mother, Angela, was in tears.

What had happened?

A serious financial reversal had taken place. An unfaithful administrator had embezzled funds and then taken his own life, shooting himself in the head.

In the biography entitled, *In the Land of the Birch Trees*, Domenica Grassiano speaks of the event as a, “terrible collapse”, one that could be considered, “more serious than an earthquake”. She stated, the Meozzi family, “...in Florence possessed great wealth, houses, fields, villas, horses, carriages and servants (having received them as an inheritance)”. She adds, after those events, they felt impoverished. Alessandro Meozzi, “folded up his coat of arms” and had to move his family elsewhere, “with what he had been able to save”³.

However, after having consulted other sources, it does not seem that the Meozzi family were reduced to bankruptcy; far from it. Yes, they would have had to give up some of their properties, but they did not descend from the pedestal of their social status and were not forced to give up the luxuries to which they had been accustomed, perhaps for centuries. In fact, in Laura’s life, long after that dark 1877, and even when she reached adolescence, she continued to speak about the villas and horses, parties and receptions of the aristocratic society.

³ Grassiano, Domenica, *Nel paese delle betulle*, Roma, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice 1981, 271.

The reversal of family fortunes, as has been mentioned, took place in Florence, the birthplace of Alessandro, but the family, as Mother Laura herself would later recount, was then living in Livorno, her mother's birthplace.

On that occasion, however, they moved to Rome. It was difficult to leave the Tuscan cities, not for Laura still so immersed in childhood, but for her parents, who had to uproot themselves from an environment where there were so many cherished people and traditions, so many long established living arrangements. Even Giovanni, now almost eleven, and Rita, who was about eight years of age, had to leave school companions, friends, and places that had already become well-known.

In the tried and tested capital of Italy, because of his illustrious reputation, Alessandro, was soon given a high-level appointment at the Ministry of Finance and Treasury. He carried out this task with great dignity and honesty for two decades.

However, as he had already done on the banks of the Arno, he always had time to give joy to his children, paying particular attention to Laura, the youngest and most delicate in health. He accompanied her to the countryside, to the fields and meadows, where he helped her to open up to the wonderful variety of nature. There were numerous small shrines here and there from which Our Lady smiled. Alessandro pointed them out to the child, lifting her lovingly to the necessary height so she could see them. Those outings, that contact with the thrill of newly budding nature, with the lively colours of the flowers and the sky, with the silvery, deep music of waterfalls and little cascades, had a profound effect on the personality of the growing child, like a window of contemplation.

At home, then, her mother would add her own specific skilful touch to that formative process. She feared that her children would form the habit of ease and comfort. She was a very refined woman, full of understanding and tenderness, but she could become like steel when she had to oppose the whims, disobedience, or the inconsistencies of life in them.

One of the Polish FMA, Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak, wrote that she had heard the following incident from Mother Laura. Once, as a young girl Laura had a decisively negative encounter with her mother. She wanted at all costs that the girl should swallow some kind of homemade tonic. Mamma Angela said, "I will force your mouth open". Laura then gave in at once, knowing that the words of her mother were never mere empty threats. Her pride kept her from being seen as forced to do something that was imposed from the outside.

Another time, when she was already older, after a long walk, Laura felt exhausted. She lay down on a couch and rang for the maid, asking her for a glass of water. Shortly after, her mother asked, "How could you ask such a thing? That woman is tired; certainly more so than you". Laura's eyes widened in surprise, "But, Mamma, why then do we have a maid?" "To help us with the work, certainly not to wait on a little girl like you!"

Laura understood this so well that she would never forget. In this regard, Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak⁴ said that Mamma Angela, "inculcated in her children respect for all people and for every kind of work," which, it might be added, in those times of intense social class distinction could certainly not be taken for granted. Furthermore, Sr. Jadwiga observed, "This was always the most distinctive characteristic in Mother Laura's life".

Tabernacle, books, and a little white pony

When she reached school age, Laura, with her sister Rita already a proud little student, was entrusted to the Sisters of St. Dorothy, who had an educational work for girls and young women of upper class families, first in Castro Pretorio Street and then in Independence Square.

A word must be said about the Sisters of St. Dorothy and this day and boarding school for young, noble ladies.

⁴ *Summarium* 152.

The Teaching Sisters of St. Dorothy were founded in 1832 by Paola Frassinetti, who was later proclaimed a saint by Pope John Paul II. Their immediate goal was completely opposite from what has just been mentioned, to devote themselves to poor girls who had been abandoned by society. In the midst of many difficulties and sacrifices, they dedicated all their strength to small parish schools.

In 1841 they arrived in Rome from Liguria where they had been founded. Here Prince Torlonia gave them an apartment over his stables. It was certainly providential, but it meant having to live with a plague of insects, and both air and water were lacking. A few months later at the invitation of some parish priests, the Sisters took upon themselves free schools for poor girls; and they also dedicated themselves to orphanages where they gathered boys and girls without families, who were scattered and in danger. They were supported in this not only by the Pope, who was then still the 'king' of Rome, but also by several noble families, who provided various kinds of assistance.

In 1878, as a response to the desires and needs of these generous families, the founder, Paola Frassinetti, agreed to open a "little school for young ladies" in Castro Pretorio Street. This choice was also motivated by the fact that precisely there, plans were being made for the church in honour of the Sacred Heart, which all who belong to the Salesian Family know so well.

Eight years earlier Pope Pius IX had already laid the foundation stone. Then, because of the annexation of Rome to the Kingdom of Italy, work had been suspended. Only in 1880 it was resumed, thanks to Don Bosco's obedience to the Pope in this difficult situation.⁵

In 1880 the two Meozzi sisters arrived at the, "school for young ladies"⁶, a boarding school where there were actually only

⁵ The above citation from *Informatio* 63, is from the *Storia delle case della Provincia Romana - Suore Dorotee della Frassinetti*.

⁶ It was called *Collegio Sacro Cuore*.

places for a few students. Later a ‘free school’ was also established near by.

Laura attended all classes there until she was sixteen years of age. She left without obtaining a diploma because it was not considered necessary for girls and young women of the upper class. In fact, it was not expected that they should become young teachers because an adequate education was thought to be sufficient to meet their needs in life. In addition to general knowledge, this would include painting classes, foreign languages, playing musical instruments, sewing, and embroidery. However, it is known that after the senior classes Laura devoted herself to the study of medicine.

Between the Sisters and the Meozzi parents, there was a profound harmony of educational direction: character building, enabling them to make sacrifices, inspiring their spirit, and illuminating with inner light making them capable of understanding and self-giving, thus rendering the proclamation of the Gospel something alive.

Laura was twelve years old when she participated fully in the Eucharist by receiving her First Communion. Pius X had not yet appeared on the scene to change the admission age, and so it remained thus for many, many years.

For Laura the sacramental encounter with Jesus was significant. It became a constant, all-encompassing factor, urging her toward a decisive life choice. This friendship was later supported by moments of grace that Laura welcomed with joy. The spiritual retreats the Sisters of St. Dorothy offered every year to pupils were significant steps along that path. They were preached by the Jesuits.

Her friend Maria Mazzoli, who also later became a Sister, like her and a missionary in Poland, in a long composition in verse

dedicated much later to Sr. Laura, says that those days of spirituality aroused in them, “ardent thoughts and affections”.⁷



There were summer periods spent by the Meozzi family on holiday at one of their estates where there were no churches nearby. Even on a Sunday the family could not go to church.

But Laura did not give up. She leaped up on her beautiful white pony and pushed her to a spirited gallop. She went to look for a church in the city, filled herself with the light of God; and returned home happy and in time for a festive lunch.

When they were all in Rome, she took advantage of the special affection that her father always showed her to get him to frequent the sacraments. “Dad, do you want to accompany me to church?”, she would ask in some significant moments of liturgical life, and he would consent.

That spirited girl’s sense of the apostolate grew ever stronger. She had met Jesus, and this intimate and personal discovery had given her much joy, a living and tangible joy, that could not remain closed in, or stifled like the Gospel lamp, absurdly confined under an overturned bushel basket. Whenever she could, she proclaimed to others that, “the kingdom of the Lord was there”, close at hand, expansive, and always filled with new hope.

Laura was not alone in this fervour. There were family members, and there was also the aforementioned Maria Mazzoli, a precious friend who also belonged to the Roman nobility, and who would be one of the foundation stones of the future Polish mission. It does not seem out of place here to dedicate some space also to her family story.

Her father, Torquato Mazzoli, had been married twice. Along with Maria, four other children were born from his first marriage, but they had all died in infancy. His wife Paola also had died,

⁷ *Summarium* 429.

leaving him alone with the child. Torquato then formed another family and a new, loveable, little sister was born.

Torquato was a good man and an excellent educator for his children. Maria never forgot his life-giving affection or the firmness with which he helped her gradually to overcome her haughty and capricious temperament.

She did, however, have some difficulties with her stepmother. Why? Certainly not because the new Mrs. Mazzoli was like Cinderella's stepmother. On the contrary! She was a gentle woman, who loved her sincerely and took care of her. She had, however, difficulty in understanding Maria's love for simple and spontaneous attitudes, without aristocratic formality. Therefore, there were always some problems relating to etiquette; and this was a burden for Maria, weighing on her because it touched her deeply.

When Maria was seventeen, finding the FMA oratory of Marghera Street was like a gift from heaven. It was frequented by both young women of a certain social status and the daughters of the working classes who were frank and impetuous. When she decided to become an FMA, she met with considerable resistance from her father, who although not opposed to her religious vocation, did not agree with her choice of an Institute so dedicated to the education of the poor, and did not see it well-suited to her social condition. Why not, instead, choose the Sisters of St. Dorothy who had so commendably contributed to her education?

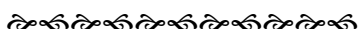
In Sr. Maria's life, there was, however, a precedent worthy of consideration. When she was still in elementary school, she had met Don Bosco. She had actually met him in the Mazzoli mansion, where he had agreed to celebrate Holy Mass in the chapel. She had received a medal of Mary Help of Christians from him. That medal never left her, so much so that at the hour of death, she handed it to Mother Laura.

This was how they became friends. Maria Mazzoli, who was three years younger, had known Laura from childhood. She called her Lola and played with her in the garden. Later, they both attended the school of the Sisters of St. Dorothy, and with her, she

meditated on the meaning of life, and chose to give herself to the Lord Jesus. She shared with her the mission of transplanting the charism in Poland.

In 1945, on an anniversary dear to Mother Laura, Sr. Maria wrote the aforementioned long and documented composition in verse, from which much information can be drawn⁸ about their childhood games, studies, and many moments of their religious life.

Do you remember, Laura, when we played in the garden? Do you remember our Sisters who educated us to a ready obedience? Do you remember Mother Casazza, who loved us very much, and who always had her pockets full of little notes for us? Do you remember our prayers, ‘at the foot of the blessed altar’, when we listened to, ‘the silent voice’ of the Lord Jesus who showed us the way?



However, it might be better not to anticipate future events. For now, Laura was still with her family. Her apostolate was made up mostly of actions. She knew that it was necessary to love and serve.

On this point she was in full accord with the way her mother wanted to educate her children.

Mamma Angela was very sensitive to the needs of the poor. For her, the fact of being born wealthy was not a point of arrival, but rather a disturbing point of departure. It was a true call to be the hand of Providence. Her daughters were soon captivated by her attitude and began to look around at the world in which they lived. They had everything they needed in order to help others. No one received a negative response to a request for assistance.

The Meozzi family also went on holiday to Tuscany, in the territory of Lucca, near the sea, where they could take advantage of their grandparents' villa. There, a clinic for the families of the fishermen had been set up. Laura and Rita devoted themselves to it

⁸ The above document is found in *Summarium* 428-432.

with all their love and with increasing competence. The university medical courses gave Laura a particular perceptiveness with regard to the various clinical cases. When these exceeded her ability for diagnosis or treatment, she asked advice from her own professors or other specialists whom she knew.

One day, a woman in grave danger of blindness appeared at that clinic. The doctor shook his head, powerless to help.

Laura and her family did not want to commit themselves to such an undertaking, but the woman, a mother of three children, pleaded with them. Thus they began the care and prayers. Laura did not give herself peace. She looked at every way, tried out all the possibilities; and the woman recovered.

It is worth mentioning a detail here which Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak reported.⁹ As a child Laura had a serious eye disease. This caused vision impairment and gave her a great sensitivity to anyone who was ill.

An insistent voice in her heart

Thus, Laura spent her adolescence in cultural studies, dedication to those who were suffering and in need, work at home, liberating rides on horseback to places where it was possible to immerse her mind and heart in the contemplation of natural beauty, and an exchange of experiences and culture with her best friends. Everything came together and harmonised in the frequency and continuous purification of her relationship with God. The centre of her devotion was the new Basilica of the Sacred Heart which, during those years sprang up like an, "exhausting miracle" in that part of the city which was becoming a ferment of national and global activities. This basilica was inaugurated in 1887, with the suffering and prophetic presence of Don Bosco himself.

At the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, Laura and many other young people of the upper classes, eager to deepen their life according to the Gospel, met a Salesian of great renown as a

⁹ Cf. Ibid. 153.

spiritual director, Fr. Federico Bedeschi. Some years later, among the young women who went to him was Teresa Valsé Pantellini.

For the Meozzi family, like many other well-to-do families in Rome, it was an inevitable practice, almost a duty of social reciprocity, to exchange invitations and receptions, with parties and dances. Mamma Angela accepted, and took part. She wanted her daughters to participate, but did not force them to do so. Those they attended were wholesome and innocent celebrations, however, they were certainly not Lenten in character. Laura could not bear them, even though, at times when they were hosted by the Meozzi family, she could not avoid participating. In those cases, her brother Giovanni agreed to dance with her, to avoid the attentions of would-be-suitors, who, while correct and polite, were also hopeful.

As soon as she could, however, Laura would leave. She went to her room to pray, immersing herself in meditation on the Passion of Jesus. Her family respected this, even though they noticed excessive tension in her behaviour. They attributed it to youthful fervour which, as such, had to be respected. Tolerance would come later.

In her biography, Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak recalled what she had heard many years later. Mother Laura said that as a young woman in her home, she prayed much more than as a religious in the Congregation. Yet, said Sr. Jadwiga, "everyone knew that her religious life was one of continual prayer, an incessant union with God"¹⁰.

Actually, she did not pray less in Poland, but only in a different way, certainly one that was much more internalised and vital.

Once, during a social event when she was young, something happened that was rather disturbing. Laura was late in appearing. She was so late, that it was feared that something had happened to

¹⁰ Ibid. 154.

her. And something really had happened. She was found unconscious near her kneeler.



The day came when Laura had a decisive conversation with her confessor. Laura would not share her life with anyone except the Lord Jesus. She felt that she was being called to the contemplative life.

Fr. Bedeschi suggested the Carmelite nuns. He would even have sent her to Spain, but not right away. She was too young and should wait for another two years.

Laura agreed, but she kept a lamp burning in her heart.

Meanwhile, the FMA had come to Rome. Seven Sisters had arrived from Nizza Monferrato, with small suitcases but with great apostolic enthusiasm that filled their hearts.¹¹ It was December 5, 1891, exactly one month before Laura Meozzi's twentieth birthday. The FMA Institute was almost as young as she was. She was about to turn twenty, and the Institute was about to be twenty years old, but this was still eight months away. December 5, January 5, August 5, it was a nice little game of dates.

The Sisters went to live in Magenta Street, very near the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. Their task did not seem one of the most exciting. They had to take care of all the washing, ironing, and mending for the Salesian Institute, and naturally, also for the boarders.

¹¹ A letter dated September 26, 1891 from Fr. Michele Rua to Pope Leo XIII, states among other things: *'The undersigned, delighted to see the prayers of his father, Don Bosco, crowned, has a group of Sisters of Mary Help of Christians ready for the Holy City'*. It was a letter of communication, but one can sense the tone of emotion, and almost of triumph, with which the rector major announced the first entry of the FMA Institute into Rome, the Holy City of the Lord Jesus. Sr. Marina Coppa was chosen as the animator of the first community in Rome. The place where they took up residence had belonged to the Mariani family from which one of the Sisters came.

They were happy, but not completely. Their little house in Magenta Street did not have a playground for the oratorians, and that was really a negative point. There were plenty of oratorians but where would they put them?

Therefore, as soon as possible in 1894 the Sisters moved to nearby Marghera Street, where the Cantoni Villa was finally ready for them. It was more spacious, and providentially, had a garden.

The building had been purchased gradually, starting with an offering of 10,000 lire from the Countess Emilia Torta as a down payment as soon as it was mentioned to her. The total amount ended up being 136,000 lire.

The announcement of the transfer was made to the 180 oratorians on November 25, and there was endless rejoicing.

The new oratory was an immediate success. Along with the poorer girls, it was also frequented by the young ladies of the surrounding area. Among them was Maria Mazzoli, who lived just a short distance away.

Meanwhile, Fr. Bedeschi thought to himself: perhaps Laura would be fine among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He spoke to her, and she who had already approached the Sisters at Marghera Street, was in full agreement. She immediately became an assistant and catechist.

The two young women, Laura and Maria, confided in a mutual friend, the novice Lucia Arcidiacono, who would later be a great educator, especially in her fine embroidery workshop which produced beautiful sacred vestments. She put them in contact with the community animator at the time, the one who was, in a way, the founder of the work at Marghera Street. Her name was Luigina Cucchietti and she was later the provincial first in Rome, then, in Livorno.

In the group, there was also another young woman who had recently graduated, one who Maria Mazzoli in her poem recalled as, “dear Emma Tonini”. She also gave some good advice to Laura and was the first to leave for the Nizza Monferrato novitiate in 1895. She did so without her mother’s permission and had to suffer

a real persecution, so much so, that she became ill and died after only four years of religious life.

Her decision quickly matured. Laura Meozzi would enter the new Institute born in Mornese only two decades previously. It was still brimming with youthful effervescence, but was already sufficiently mature to cross oceans and continents to bring to new lands an educational charism all based on the three-fold idea of reason, religion, and loving kindness. The Sisters entrusted themselves completely to Mary Help of Christians, and were ready to give all they were and all they had to their last breath, for the salvation of youth.¹²

Her heart had a holy desire, but there was a huge obstacle that barred the way. How would she help her parents to understand her deep aspirations? Laura sensed the coming storm. Then she confided in her sister Rita, almost inviting her to take the place of two, to become more daughter for her parents to fill the great void that she would leave. She knew that it could not be filled; and she also knew that, in this case, it was not an emptiness, but a new and different fullness of communion.

Yes, but how was she to help her parents to understand all this?

Then there was a surprise in store for her. Rita said, "If you become a Sister, I will come with you". It was a massive decision, irrevocable, and final. Shouldn't she wait a little while so as not to wound their parents too deeply? No. Rita was adamant.

So it was that both sisters found no other way than to kneel before the altar to ask for strength, courage, hope, and love. They knew that there would be very intense suffering, especially in their father's heart.

¹² Words pronounced by Don Bosco in 1887, "I promised God that until my last breath my work would be for my poor young people". (MB XVIII 268).

It was a moment of Gethsemane. Everyone in the house felt as if something vital had suddenly collapsed.

Mamma Angela gradually accepted the unexpected turn on the road of life, and she herself accompanied her daughters to Nizza Monferrato. Their father instead was silent. He closed himself up in his pain, and for a long time he neither spoke nor wrote a word to Laura and Rita.

When the two sisters left their home he did not embrace them. Only five years later would they be reconciled. This came about because of a kind of 'holy cunning' on the part of the Mother General, Sr. Caterina Daghero.

Having to send the Vicar General, Mother Enrichetta Sorbone, to Tuscany as her representative for a particular mission, the newly-professed Sr. Laura Meozzi was asked to accompany her, thus giving her the opportunity of encountering her father. It is not known if the meeting took place in Livorno or Florence,¹³ but this was of secondary importance. The fact was that there was a meeting. Papa Alessandro embraced his daughter, finally expressing that 'yes' to God that had been gradually maturing in his heart.

It was a time of celebration for everyone.

A journey into mystery

They were on vacation in their beautiful Tuscany. Nizza Monferrato was not actually that far, considering the distance in kilometres, but for the wounded hearts of all the members of the Meozzi family, it was an absolutely immeasurable distance. It was July 31, 1895. Laura and Rita, accompanied by their mother, arrived at the centre of the FMA Institute.¹⁴

¹³ *Informatio* 67 mentions Livorno; Jadwiga Dudziak, in *Summarium* 155, names Florence.

¹⁴ The FMA Institute had its generalate in Mornese from 1872 to 1879. It was later transferred first to Nizza Monferrato, then in 1929 to Turin, and finally in 1969, to Rome.

Mamma Meozzi was in no hurry to leave. She stayed in Nizza for a good month hoping that sooner or later her daughters would re-pack their suitcases to return home with her. Perhaps when faced with the difficulty of scant food, the discipline of the schedule, or of that unspeakable manner of dress would have caused them to think twice about their choice. Perhaps, they would have missed the comforts, the colours, the beautiful satin fabrics, horseback riding, and at least for Rita, also the lively dance music. But the two young women did not listen to temptation; they had made their choice, and would remain faithful to it.

It would happen sometimes that Rita would fall back for a moment to the custom of the nobility that called for a change of clothing before dinner. So it was that when the bell rang announcing the meal, she instinctively ran to replace her black morning dress with another one equally poor and black. But this only caused even her to utter a joyful, little laugh.

Actually, the two young women were happy, with an intimate and profound happiness that could live alongside a wounded heart, a happiness that illumined all suffering and made prayer resplendent.

During those years the postulants were entrusted to Sr. Marina Coppa¹⁵ who was then twenty-six years old.

Sr. Marina, or Mother Marina as everyone had always known her in the Institute, had already been an animator three times in the space of three years. On the first occasion, while she was still newly professed she was appointed animator of the little house of Incisa Belbo. Having anticipated her perpetual profession, she was called to fulfil this mandate first in Rome and then in Bordighera. She had been chosen specifically to initiate these two new communities. Finally, in 1894, with only three years of profession,

¹⁵ Monticello d'Alba, Cuneo 1869 - Nizza Monferrato 1928. She was an outstanding FMA. She was responsible for establishing educational practices applicable especially to scholastic environments. From 1901 she was general councillor for studies for twenty-seven years. Her circular letters were very important. See also the following biography: Dalcerci, Lina, *Madre Marina Coppa*, Torino, Istituto FMA 1956.

she received the delicate mandate to devote herself to the formation of future FMA.

In her relationship with the postulants at Nizza, Mother Marina was judged to be the ideal formator, capable of speaking with her whole person, and of, “leading all by her love”¹⁶.

Certainly, Mamma Angela must also have been won over. She remained forever a close friend of the Sisters, and for years it was a joy for her to return to visit even for fairly long periods of time.

Sr. Maria Mazzoli remembers a serious influenza epidemic that hit the members of the community at some point. Sr. Marina Coppa became an all present angel for the postulants. She was there, close to every patient, with all her delicacy and encouraging love, which was worth more than the medicine administered by doctors and nurses.

She did not, however, show excessive pity, because those young people had to learn to deal with adversity. Had they not chosen to follow the Saviour?

On this point, Laura was more than in agreement. Her only desire was to, ‘win Christ’; everything else was, and had to be more and more, only so much rubbish (Cf. Phil 3:8).

The time of entrance into the novitiate was one of great inner inspiration and was also spectacular. The postulants lined up wearing white bridal gowns and tulle veils, reappearing shortly afterward all in black. It was a moment of great emotion because the dark colouring of the long robes contrasted with the beautiful young faces on which the joy of the heart appeared.

It is not known if Mamma Angela was present on April 26, 1896. It is quite possible that she was.

On that occasion there were fifty new novices. The celebration took place at Nizza Monferrato; then during the afternoon all those young people moved to the novitiate in the house called La Bruna, which was situated a bit higher on the hill. They were accompanied by the Bursar General, Mother Angiolina Buzzetti, and followed

¹⁶ *Informatio* 69.

by all the Sisters, postulants, and boarders in joyful procession. The Director General, Fr. Clemente Bretto, and several priests, Salesians and others, also arrived at the house.

All of this is recorded in the house chronicles of the novitiate.¹⁷

The novice formator to whom the young women were entrusted was Sr. Ottavia Bussolino, a great woman, a great educator, and a great missionary.

She was from San Damiano d'Asti, Monferrato. From the day of her profession, which occurred in August 1880, to February 1881, she had spent a few months close to Mother Mazzarello. She left for Argentina with the third missionary expedition when she was not yet seventeen.¹⁸

After having been provincial for eight years in Argentina, Sr. Ottavia later returned to Italy for General Chapter III. She remained at Nizza as the person responsible for the formation of about 90 postulants, and later, 200 novices.

In 1902 a new obedience led her to resume her travels by sea. A secure guide was needed for the new missionary expedition that was destined for Mexico, where the Sisters had been since 1894 and were now preparing to deal with the revolution. Sr. Ottavia was nominated as provincial for a first then a second time in that country. In the interval, she had been so also in Colombia then later in Peru.

She also lived for a time in Bolivia and spent her last years in Argentina, where she died in 1939.

In 1896 at Nizza Monferrato Sr. Ottavia accompanied with great responsibility that group of young women who had made the radical choice of wanting to entrust their full potential: physical,

¹⁷ Anno 1896, 26 aprile, in AGFMA.

¹⁸ There were three missionary expeditions during the lifetime of the co-foundress. The first left on November 14, 1877, the second, January 1, 1879, and the third, on February 3, 1881. All left for South America.

moral, emotional, intellectual and religious, and all their future years of life to the invisible hands of the mystery of the Lord Jesus.

It was no small task to work with them. This could be done only if she was completely empty of self and was entrusted to the same invisible mystery. She sought to indicate to them the path of complete generosity, acting always with patience and human understanding.

There are only a few brief episodes recorded from the time of Sr. Laura Meozzi's novitiate.

She was in front of the office of the novice formator quietly reading while waiting her turn to enter. The formator, perhaps testing her, did not call. Then she asked, "What did you think about the delay?" "Nothing. It was my day for the interview, so I waited in peace." This fact must have made an impression because at least three persons mentioned it.

This following event took place in the evening. Because they were so many, the novices lined up for the Good Night. One of them unable to quell her exuberance tried to strike up a conversation with her neighbour. Sr. Laura leaned close to her attempting to get her to be quiet. The formator called out, "Meozzi, why are you disturbing?" Laura did not offer an excuse but merely thanked her for the observation.

Actually, the novice formator had understood very well, and a short time later would honestly tell her, "I could not correct the other person because she would have reacted badly".

The formator's behaviour may be judged differently by some observers. However, it remains true that her companions considered Sr. Laura as a person who was, "very polite, humble, prudent, submissive, and full of charity." "She distinguished herself for her humility, patience, devotion. She was identified as an exemplary novice."¹⁹

Once, a crusade of prayer was proposed in the novitiate. The Superior General, Mother Caterina Daghero, needed bended knees and prayerful hearts, because a great grace was required for the life

¹⁹ Testimonies found in *Summarium* 74, 446.

of the Institute. The date chosen was probably a Sunday because the novices were free from their usual commitments and they could pray as much as they wanted. Laura went to chapel and knelt before the Lord Jesus present in the Eucharist, and did not notice anything else. It is not known how it happened, but the fact was that at some point Mother Daghero herself went to look for her and to call her back gently, perhaps to send her to the evening meal. Eight hours had passed and Laura was still there. Does her 'distraction' not remind one of Dominic Savio at Valdocco?

The intense life at Nizza Monferrato

Sr. Maria Mazzoli had to extend her time of novitiate because of the strong opposition from her family, so it was that her religious profession took place somewhat later than that of the Meozzi sisters.

Laura and Rita Meozzi were professed on April 17, 1898, and Maria Mazzoli on August 22 of the same year. Maria stated, "Mother Ottavia studied our vocation and found it strong and sincere".²⁰

These might seem like casual words, but they are like a poem. They merit further reflection: 'vocation', 'strong', 'sincere'. There is a guarantee for a future; and there is all the substance of one who is attentive to the voice of God, a person who does not give in even in the face of death, a transparent person, one who breathes and helps others to breathe the simplicity of a pure heart.

So it was that in the chapel of the novitiate²¹ the Sisters wearing crowns of white roses offered themselves to the Lord Jesus. They chose him as the centre of their lives, as a good that surpassed any other desire, as the eternal inheritance of hope for the Kingdom of God.

²⁰ Ibid. 430.

²¹ The FMA novitiate of Nizza Monferrato dedicated to St. Joseph, was opened on January 2, 1895. The house was blessed by Fr. Michele Rua.

The time of the presentation of the crucifix, today's Rite of Religious Profession states:

Receive the cross of Christ.
Live with your eyes fixed on Him,
who was crucified for love
to become, like Him
always more profoundly immersed
in His Paschal mystery.

In those bygone years, the text was less synthetic and used rather a rhetorical language no longer familiar today such as, "banner of our redemption". However, it was equally strong in calling attention to the ever more authentic and wholehearted response one is called to give to Christ's total self-donation, the culmination of his obedience to the Father for the salvation of humankind.

It is true that you will have to bear the cross with him, but the thought of the Apostle Paul will be of great comfort to, 'Whoever suffers with Christ on earth, will then enjoy much with Him in Heaven.'²²

A brief undated writing from Sr. Laura has been preserved. It is a text indicating her whole life's direction, her whole range of fundamental and absolute values. The title, *Guidelines for My Soul*, is very significant. She wrote:

Crucifixion of the soul and body with Jesus, in continual consummation. Climb, climb continuously along a path of crosses, without stopping and with a smile on your lips. Slowly taste the cross in abandonment, in contempt, in obscurity. Sacrifice the years drop by drop. Allow self to be crucified by God and men, in gentleness and humility, in silence, in gratitude. Lead a hidden life in God; suffer in all and for all, everything that can make one suffer more. Love pain, desiring it, delighting in it, transforming yourself into Jesus through love and suffering.

²² *Rite of Religious Profession* (AGFMA).

The *Summarium* notes that these words, written by Sr. Laura, were found after her death, written on a parchment that she must have “always kept close at hand” because it was, “very worn”.

At times it was the novices themselves who proclaimed or sang of great, heroic and sublime things. It even brings a smile to read similar prophetic thoughts because one feels that, despite the sincerity of the heart, they have not yet had personal experience.

Was Sr. Laura one of those novices? If so, hers was not a youthful dream.

If, instead, these words were written later, in the grip of a reality already entirely marked by, “a path of crosses”, one need only bow her head before the sanctifying presence of the Spirit. In this case, however, the seed was already there in the vibrant days of vocational youthfulness.



Her journey from the novitiate to her first apostolate was very short. After Profession, Sr. Laura once again found herself at the generalate. Here, her first obedience was to study in order to achieve recognised qualifications.

In autumn of 1898, Sr. Laura took the qualifying examination for teaching elementary school at the Feminine Royal Teacher Training School of Alessandria. The results were:

- General Examination: 97 out of 150
- Teaching Skills: 10 out of 10
- Practical Lesson: 9 out of 10.²³

Later she added other qualifications to these:

- Certificate of Diligence and Proficiency issued by the Higher Feminine Institute Maria Bobba, Turin, for a course in sewing and dressmaking that she attended in 1899. Overall average in the theoretical and practical examination was 19 out of 20.

²³ *Summarium* 338.

- Diploma for Teaching Gymnastics in Senior Secondary Schools given in Turin in 1901. "She successfully passed the examinations in all subjects."

- Qualification for the Teaching of Physical Education in the schools of the Kingdom. It was dated October 28, 1912. There were obviously new legislative measures, which made a stronger and broader preparation necessary for teachers of the subject in question.

Finally, there is a further official document issued in 1915, a manuscript, signed by Professor Salvatore Pennino, of the University of Catania and approved by the Office of Health Director, Dr. Salvatore Tiralongo. It stated:

I certify that Sr. Laura Meozzi completed a comprehensive nursing course in the health centre directed by me. She assisted at various operations and took an interest in the application of medicines and in dressing wounds. She showed herself to be suitably intelligent in acquiring knowledge and sufficiently practical and caring in performing the tasks entrusted to her. I can conscientiously affirm that the said Sr. Laura Meozzi is an excellent nurse, both for the assistance of medical patients and for those who require surgery. I am issuing this certificate so that it can be of value where necessary.

While studying, Sr. Laura was, however, also an educator.

The FMA Teacher Training School in Nizza Monferrato was already flourishing. Since 1897 it had been recognised:

... by the government of the king, as an approved site for the granting of certificates by a joint committee that was composed of government teachers and the school's own teachers.

A short time later, in 1900, it was declared to be on a level with other schools of its kind, and finally, in 1925, it was proclaimed to be of equal status.²⁴

²⁴ Cf. www.scuolanizza.it/la_nostra_storia.html. The school at Nizza, 'was built with the explicit aim of promoting the education of women based on an eminently Christian, Catholic foundation. It took its inspiration from the humanistic and educational choices of the Founder, Don Bosco, with the

In that school, already so important for the local population, Sr. Laura taught gymnastics from 1889-1901. Yes, gymnastics, and yes, during those years!

In the community, Sr. Laura was considered to be a person who was always ready for service with neither fuss nor exhibitionism. She did everything as if it were nothing and in the most spontaneous and natural way, with tact and discretion.

Two particular facts are remembered, one by Sr. Maria Mazzoli who actually saw it, and the other by Sr. Jadwiga Duzdiak, who heard about it.

One evening, at the Good Night, the animator announced that a new Sister was needed to run errands outside the house. Sr. Mazzoli said:

No Sister volunteered because the commitment was not easy. Indeed, it was even a bit humiliating, since the person who would assume the task, in order to go out alone, had to lay aside the religious habit.

At that point, Sr. Laura raised her hand and with a sign indicated to her companion that she should do the same. The animator knew that she could not accept that offer because the two Sisters already had other tasks to perform. However, she neither smiled nor praised their generosity, “on the contrary, she humiliated them saying that they only wanted to dress up like young ladies”.

It was an important moment for all. The animator judged Sr. Laura’s humility correctly. Sr. Laura did not utter a word of excuse, and on her face there was the sincere acceptance of the public correction she had received.²⁵

Another, more extensive fact regards a serious illness that Sr. Laura suffered during those years of her youth. She just spent a

particular intention of forming teachers’. Cf. Cavaglià, Piera, *Educazione e cultura per la donna*, Roma, LAS, 1990, 111.

²⁵ Cf. *Summarium* 156.

brief period in bed but soon declared herself cured. However, this was not the simple flu, it was something more serious, as was later realised. She was left with the cardiac asthma that continued to torment her in the years that followed.

The basis on which this is remembered was not a lack of care by the nurse on duty, but rather the total absence of personal demands that led Sr. Laura not to take any notice of herself, busy as she was in exercising her constant apostolic zeal.

Apostolic ministry in Italy

Autumn of 1901 arrived quickly, marking a new beginning in the apostolate of Sr. Laura, but it required some detachment. She had to leave Nizza and her sister Rita had to go to the house of Bordighera.

Sr. Rita, instead, still remained in Nizza. She would leave the following year when she was assigned to Novara as a teacher in the Immaculate Conception boarding school. Later she would be transferred to Bordighera, but by then Sr. Laura would no longer be there.

It would be good now to say a word about Sr. Rita, since she will no longer be a member of the same community as that of Sr. Laura, though they would remain united in affection and prayer.

Sr. Rita never left Italy. She carried out her educational mission, in addition to Novara, also in Casale, Dalmazia Street in Rome, and on two different occasions in Bordighera, where she died in 1955.

The two sisters had very different personalities and characters, but they felt equally happy in their vocation as FMA.

Sr. Rita had a talent that enabled her to move between different forms of artistic expression. At three or three-thirty in the morning, she would quietly rise and go to her little studio to paint.

She jokingly said that she was, “the woman of 200 diplomas”. This was certainly a symbolic number, but actually Sr. Rita

willingly attended courses and congresses to improve her educational skills. She was a qualified mathematics teacher and gave private lessons in painting. The students loved her, even though they felt that she was demanding. They understood that she was genuinely interested in their progress both in their studies and in their psychological and spiritual development.

Sr. Rita reached the venerable age of ninety. Her later years were darkened by a painful mental decline, and her death was preceded by a very long agony.²⁶



At this point another historical note regards the foundation of the FMA community at Bordighera.

In the second volume of the *Cronistoria* one finds the following:

February 1876. The whole house is busy preparing for a new expansion of the Institute. [...] It involves moving almost to the border between Italy and France, to Torrión di Bordighera, a small town in the western Ligurian coast, five kilometres from Ventimiglia. Viewed from Mornese, the place is equivalent almost to the end of the world. The climate is very mild; large palm trees are abundant, giving to the whole area the appearance of an Eastern country. Even in the dead of winter brilliantly hued flowers grow there in profusion. The English claim it as their favourite residence; but with them, Protestantism has taken up residence.²⁷

The candour with which all of this is told should be noted. The young women of Mornese, having recently become FMA, remained impressed by that sort of enchanted garden, almost a paradise on earth. Their joy, however, was flawed by the presence of an inevitable serpent with the bright colours of its devastating coils hidden in the grass. This serpent, in those years in which

²⁶ For this Sister see, Secco, Michelina, *Facciamo memoria - Cenni biografici delle FMA defunte nel 1955*, Roma, Istituto FMA, 1999, 287.

²⁷ Capetti, Giselda, *Cronistoria II*, Roma, Istituto FMA, 1976, 171.

ecumenical dialogue was still far from a common pastoral practice, was the presence of the Waldensians.

The *Cronistoria* continued:

Giovanni Battista Biale, Bishop of Ventimiglia, suffering because of the damage to many souls, had repeatedly turned to Don Bosco in order to curb this rampant wave of heresy. Eventually, he obtained the presence of both Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Since the mission reserved for those departing would be difficult, on February 6, 7, and 8 the community of Mornese gathered in prayer to celebrate the Forty Hours Adoration. Then on February 9 the detachment took place. Sr. Orsola Camisassa, Sr. Rosalia Pestarino and the novice Agostina Calcagno departed. Mother Mazzarello accompanied them as far as Gavi, walking with them over the frozen snow. She would have liked to go even further, but could not, because in Mornese there was a Sister who was seriously ill. Actually, when Mother Mazzarello returned, she found her already in the peace of death.



All this took place in 1876. In 1901, Sr. Laura Meozzi arrived in Bordighera. Twenty-five years had passed since its foundation. In addition to a flourishing oratory, the Sisters of the community also managed a student hostel and primary and lower secondary schools. They were also beginning higher classes for the preparation of elementary school teachers, which was why it was necessary to implement a particular movement of teaching personnel.

The house chronicle noted the arrival of Sr. Laura on September 18, and announced that her task would be to teach history, geography, and science in the three lower secondary classes. She was also entrusted with the third elementary class and the assistance of the adolescent boarders.

How could she withstand so much work, which forced her to bounce like a ball from one place and from one type of occupation to another?

Yet, she never missed an encounter with God, indeed, it strengthened her for ever newer apostolic undertakings.

In 1893 another house had been opened in Liguria almost on the opposite side of the Riviera di Ponente, at Varazze in the Savona province.

The Santa Caterina Institute was built as an orphanage. It was founded at the desire of a few well-to-do women who had committed themselves to provide for the expenses. After a year, however, it was seen that, thank God, the orphans were not so numerous as to justify the existence of that institution, which appeared to be economically challenging. Therefore, it was also opened to female students able to pay even a modest tuition as regular boarders.

So it was that Sr. Laura Meozzi was sent there after only one year spent in Bordighera. At Varazze, instead, she stayed for nine years. This was her longest time in Liguria.

She assumed various educational tasks as a teacher and assistant and even dedicated a direct service to the community when, in 1908, she was appointed vicar.

Sr. Pierina Sutto, who preceded her as vicar, remembers her as an angel of kindness, discreet and silent, but ever present to the needs of others. When she saw anyone in difficulty, she would pass by and whisper, "I am offering a novena for you," and if possible, her concern did not stop there.

During the summertime, the house of Varazze was also opened as a seaside resort for some youth groups. One was for a time managed by the National Protection and Mutual Aid Society for Young Working Women. They were accompanied by the

Founder, Cesarina Artesana²⁸, a great woman who was completely dedicated to the social advancement of young women workers. She was also supported by the enlightened advice of Fr. Michele Rua.²⁹

About twenty of the young people arrived at Bordighera. Their behaviour was very challenging, so much so that the Sisters were left rather bewildered. They were entrusted to the wise, discreet assistance of Sr. Laura, and all went well, to the great satisfaction of the young people who felt that they had met a friend.

In those bright summers of the Riviera di Ponente there was also a guest who crowned all others with joyful gratitude, and it was Mamma Angela. She would go to Varazze to share a little in the life of her daughters Laura and Rita, especially after Alessandro had gone to heaven.

Rita as well? Yes, Rita also because she was a member of the Bordighera community during those years. Do you think that her provincial would not grant her time to be with her mother and sister in Varazze?



²⁸ Between the end of the 1800s and the early 1900s there was a period of strong industrialisation during which the situation of the working woman was particularly difficult and painful. Different types of social reform were on the rise. In 1901, Cesarina Artesana succeeded in opening fifty centres called, Societies to which hundreds of thousands of female workers belonged, first in Turin then in other parts of Italy. In 1902 the magazine *The Working Woman* appeared. In addition to being committed to a peaceful settlement of labour disputes, always in favour of working women, the Societies also took an interest in issues of health and hygiene, culture and formation in general, offering alpine and seaside camps, recreation centres, Sunday and evening schools, theatres, trips, libraries, homes, legal counselling, medical and obstetrical care and more.

²⁹ Fr. Michele Rua (1837-1910) was the first successor of Don Bosco as guide of the Salesian Society. He was beatified by Pope Paul VI on October 29, 1972.

The year 1907 brought a wave of darkness to Varazze. It was not the darkness of black clouds that would rise from the sea with a great desire to empty themselves out in a downpour of rain, but one that was much more dense, dark and penetrating, like the anguished darkness that suddenly erupts in people, sowing bewilderment, and horror. At Varazze there was a Masonic group that would do anything to harm the Church. It was like a serpent that slithered in the shadows, ready to seize the moment with a darting, forked, poisonous tongue.

The calendar marked the date of July 29. At a state school administered by the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB) the school year had already concluded peacefully, and there had been a beautiful awards celebration, in which not only the relatives of the pupils had participated, but also several other locals. About twenty boys remained in the house waiting to be picked up by their parents to start the summer holidays.

At eight in the morning, while all were in the chapel, suddenly a dozen policemen burst in. "Enough prayers; leave this place immediately." The boys were put on one side, and the Salesians on the other, all under strict surveillance. Then, they were taken to police headquarters in groups for questioning.

But why?

Here is the reason directly from the lips of the Rector, Fr. Carlo Viglietti:

- I was called first and brought in before the Director of Education, Cavalier Zaglia. He looked me up and down and, after a while, he told me that I could speak with him as I would with a father. I thanked him and asked what the charges against us were.

- The black Masses! Black Masses!

The 'black Masses'! There was an evil press campaign, driven by a certain Ettore Ferrari, an important leader of the worst local Freemasons. It was claimed that, besides the Salesians who were the persons mainly responsible, these 'black Masses' were said to have been attended by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians,

the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of the Immaculate, the Capuchins, and several other priests of the city!

During these rituals which, according to the indictment, had been celebrated for months, from November to July, 'incredible wickedness' took place of a sexual/political nature such as the destruction of portraits of King Vittorio Emanuele and Giuseppe Garibaldi!

Who had signed that abhorrent accusation? It was a fifteen-year old youth, named Carlo Marlario, also known as Alessandro Besson from the surname of his mother.

He was a seriously demented young man. Five years later, when he would be convicted, the Court of Appeals of Genoa described his sentence in this way without ceremony, and with the type of language used by Lambroso:

...a degenerate with paranoid ideas and erotic content, with deficiency and asymmetry in the somatic and mental spheres, therefore, completely irresponsible; and also more dangerous to society than a criminal, one who requires special care and proper isolation from civil society, the illegitimate son of Vincenzina Besson, likewise held by the aforementioned technicians [professors Morselli, Buccelli and De Paoli] to be a fatuous individual with some touches of hysteria; one who is easily influenced, fanatical, erotic, and so only partially responsible.³⁰

This Alessandro Besson had been a pupil of the Salesians for some months and, therefore, knew the names of the staff and students. He composed a memoir or diary that was decidedly obscene.³¹

But had he written it, or rather copied it from a text prepared by those who had hatched the conspiracy? The second alternative

³⁰ Amadei, Angelo, *Il servo di Dio Michele Rua*, vol 3°, Torino, SEI, 1934, 324.

³¹ In the cited work one reads: "These pages reveal a pornographic understanding and a knowledge of medical terminology unimaginable in a fifteen year old adolescent". The historian, Carlo Cipolla wrote to Fr. Rua, "They are accusations that, precisely because they are so stupidly absurd, show themselves to be false at the first reading".

was considered to be more valid, also because other copies were discovered, sent clandestinely to the authorities concerned.

This boy, with his mother,³² was present at the interrogations to which both religious and their pupils were subjected. The boy, wrote Angelo Amadei, Fr. Rua's biographer, "...intervened while the mother coaxed those being interrogated, trying to get them to say 'yes' when they meant 'no'. The interrogators, instead, resorted to blows". Two Salesians were arrested.

Immediately, the dark, sweeping wave hit the newspapers. It would be useful here to cite a few headlines in order to understand just how poisonous it was:

- Unheard of immorality in Varazze
- Unheard of wickedness in the Salesian School at Varazze
- The ugly scandals of Varazze
- Obscene priestly behaviour.³³

There were quite a few anti-clerical demonstrations in several cities and not just in Liguria. However, counter-demonstrations soon occurred. In Turin, the past-pupils gathered around Fr. Rua and publicly denounced the slanderers.

It took a while to convince this holy rector major to resort to legal action which is always unpleasant, but they finally obtained his consent. Here is what Fr. Viglione wrote in this regard:

On August 3, the shipwrecked victims finally began to see land. Our Superior General, Fr. Rua has gathered the reports of the infamous slander for us, for the good name of the Sons of Don Bosco, and for the spotless reputation of the Salesian houses around the world. He has already appointed our lawyers and lodged a complaint against the slanderers.

³² Actually, l'*Informatio* reports that Vincenzina Besson was neither the biological nor the adoptive mother of the boy. Alessandro, in fact, was a foundling whom she fostered from the Ospizio dell'Infanzia Abbandonata of Genoa on June 25, 1892. She had given him her own surname.

³³ Amadei, op, cit., 325.

Many took action even from other cities, so much so that, from August 4 the newspapers began to retract, publishing some corrective statements:

- The sick imagination of the young Besson
- It is the work of a psychotic
- A jumble of invented scandals

On August 8 in Varazze, citizens organised an enthusiastic demonstration in support of the Salesians. But only on September 17 were the two who had been arrested released. It was November 2 before the authorisation was unanimously voted to reopen the schools, and only in 1912 were sentences imposed on the slanderers.³⁴

The so-called, ‘events of Varazze’, wrote Eugenio Ceria in the Annals of the Salesian Society, had been foreseen by Don Bosco, who in 1884, “had the same dream for three successive nights, about the diabolical conferences intent on studying the means by which to exterminate his congregation”.

He told everything to Fr. Viglietti and said, “Get ready to see the events”.

Then Fr. Ceria, returning to the events that had already occurred, reflected thus, “In the timing one seems to see all the wickedness of the devil”. The charges, in fact, were unleashed five days after Don Bosco had been declared Venerable by the Holy See. Soon:

...the name of Varazze spread throughout Italy with the speed of an electric spark, becoming a battle cry that rallied anti-clericals, including those of other countries, especially in France and Belgium.³⁵

The Santa Caterina Institute where Sr. Laura lived was also implicated in that hellish pit of slander.

³⁴ Cf. Ibid. 327 sgg.

³⁵ Ceria, Eugenio, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, vol 3°, Torino, SEI 1945. Pages 684-702 are dedicated to these events.

There were thirty boarders in the school on the morning of July 30 when the police arrived.

There was a repetition of the ritual that had already taken place with the Salesians: girls on one side, Sisters on the other.

Alessandro Besson pointed his poisonous finger first at four Sisters, then at one of the girls. According to him, they were the ones that he 'had seen' attend the 'black Mass' of April 23.³⁶

The responses were frank and decisive. One of those questioned actually believed that the 'black Mass' was one that was celebrated for the repose of the dead, because the vestments that the priest wore then were black, not purple like those of today.

The Sisters received the decree closing the schools on August 3.

Turning to Sr. Laura, the deadly finger of Alessandro Besson had not pointed directly at her that day, but the horror affected her in such a way as to leave a mark of sadness and disgust for the rest of her life.

One thing needs to be considered. The slander that took place during those interrogations constituted for her, as for the others, not only an unbearable punishment but also a grim revelation of evil. This is part of spiritual agony, the agony that makes one sweat blood.

Whoever chooses inner purity as the supreme law of life, avoids the murkiness of the swamp.

As a result of the storm in the newspapers, the agony was transmitted even to Mamma Angela and to Giovanni, Laura's brother, who had become chief administrator of the State Archives and was regarded by all to be a man of unequivocal integrity.

³⁶ Ibid. 688.

Papa Alessandro, as has been mentioned, was already dead, but his reading of the events would have been very special.



Deeply torn by grief, Fr. Michele Rua reached the point of feeling guilty. He believed that it was he, the unworthy and sinful rector major, who had attracted all that desolation as a punishment on the members of the Congregation and the families of the pupils. Why had he agreed to be rector major when he was so poor and incapable? Here is how he expressed it:

I relied on my own strength. I am the guilty one, but unfortunately, it has been the divine will to allow the good and innocent to suffer with me. I languish in tears, and in prayer I implore divine clemency that I alone should bear my punishment.³⁷

At that time Mother Caterina Daghero was the Superior General of the FMA. Regarding the ‘events of Varazze’, no specific words from her have been handed down, but one can imagine how she must have felt. Perhaps she remained a bit in the shadow of the rector major, but her heart was also living in the storm.³⁸

The absence of a written reference anywhere in her circulars is very understandable. Why disturb the peace of so many young Sisters, whose pure hearts were only open to the good? It was more than enough to turn to God, who saw all and who permitted all with fatherly love.

³⁷ Amadei, op.cit. 330.

³⁸ Her biography limits itself to these expressions, “And when a villainous calumny struck the Salesians and also the FMA who had flourishing works at Varazze. [...] Reading these facts we feel indignation and sorrow. Mother Caterina Daghero, like Fr. Rua, suffered everything. However, there are sufferings which are not seen from outside, which are hidden, indeed, they had to be hidden from the eyes of the majority. They sometimes were revealed in a fleeting shadow on her face, or in brief, but very expressive words. They were intimate sufferings”. Mainetti, Giuseppina, *Madre Caterina Daghero*, Torino, S.E.I. 1940, 253.

A precious mission as animator

Sr. Laura's perpetual profession took place on September 7, 1907, in Bordighera, nine years after her first profession. In those years there was no time limit prescribed by Canon Law. The Constitutions then in act said:

The major superior, in agreement with the superior chapter of the Sisters, after the religious has laudably made triennial vows once or twice, may admit her to perpetual vows, if this is considered beneficial to the Sister or to the Institute.³⁹

The profession pronounced by Sr. Laura on that day was a profession of faith lived in the most bitter suffering. It had been little more than a month since the horrendous questioning that had pierced the veil of a universe of trash and lies, an interrogation that seemed to be directed by a demon eager to scandalise, to destroy, to dig profound dark pits in innocent hearts.

However, it was also a full, radical profession of faith in the Lord, and therefore, a great moment of joy. Her vow of chastity was an anthem to liberation; her vows of poverty and obedience were a conscious movement of absolute abandonment to the Providence of the Father. And then, there was Mary Help of Christians, the mother, teacher, and guide, kindness that comforted and refreshed.

A short time later Sr. Laura was appointed vicar of the community while continuing to perform her tasks as an educator, teacher, and assistant among the girls of the school. The year 1909 was the first year in which the chronicle of Varazze appeared.⁴⁰

³⁹ These Constitutions were later re-written in 1906, after the promulgation by the Holy See of the *Normae secundum quas*. In them Article 31 reads, 'The three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience will be made first *ad annum* for a period of three years, then for another period of three years after which perpetual vows will be made'. Sr. Laura's Profession followed shortly after this promulgation.

⁴⁰ The house was opened on September 25, 1893. However, for some unknown reason, the house chronicle only began to appear in 1909.

Sr. Laura was repeatedly named as, "...a most trustworthy person, always ready to attend to new and delicate tasks".

The film unfolded rapidly. Sr. Laura accompanied the Sisters to certain medical examinations, received various authorities with refinement, starting with the members of the FMA general council when they passed through Liguria, and represented the Varazze community on the occasion of special celebrations in Nizza Monferrato. Finally, Sr. Laura is remembered as the acting animator when the Sister in charge, Sr. Caterina Trivella, had to be absent for health reasons.

Then, in September of 1911, Sr. Laura had to pack her suitcases again. She was sent to Genoa, as bursar for a boys' orphanage called the Children's Hostel.

At that time and in that place this was not an easy task.

The Children's Hostel had come into being five years earlier, in a house that the Salesian Cooperator, Erasmo Piaggio, Senator of the Kingdom, had donated for that purpose. There one could see the posthumous hand of Don Bosco because it was he who had attracted Senator Piaggio to the Salesian Family.

Erasmo Piaggio was a naval entrepreneur with an extremely broad vision. It would be enough to take even a quick look at the list of his achievements in industry and society and his services rendered, to feel not only admiration but also a kind of awe. It does not seem possible that everything on the list could be attributed to one man.

The purpose of the hostel was expressed in the Acts of Foundation. It was to distinguish itself:

... for simplicity and agility of movement, in contrast to the ways of the pious works of the city, which had too many bureaucratic rules and regulations that slowed down any actual assistance.

It was a real revolution against the red-tape of official bureaucracy.

The primary purpose of the foundation, however, was the following: to be able to, "return the children to the family", after trying with all possible care, to make them, "healthier and better people." If there was no family, it would try to, "place them happily in an institute or in foster care, after obtaining accurate information about the family of adoption".⁴¹ The hostel was thus a kind of outpost, which undertook immediate action, like an emergency room.

The guests were all children or teenagers from five to fourteen years of age, "who were strays, beggars, lost, with sick parents, orphans, or victims of crime." Today they would be called, street children, but the adjective 'stray' is much stronger, and expresses their condition. It was a cry of accusation against a selfish and indifferent society, of yesterday or today, a society that sometimes takes better care of stray dogs than of stray children.

But there was also another side to it; those who were merely dealing with the young people, and those who had dedicated their lives to caring for them.

Those children were brought to the hostel either by the police, the authorities or different people of goodwill who had formed a regular association. An archival report says that, "about seventy children were ordinarily present in the house, with an average movement of thirty incoming and thirty outgoing monthly".

The following year, Sr. Laura, was appointed community animator still in Genoa, but not at the Children's Hostel. A new community was established, a type of boarding house for girls and young women who had to come to the city to attend different courses in the capital and were far from their families.

The work changed its address three times: Magenta Street, Mentana Boulevard, and Sardegna Boulevard. The house of

⁴¹ *Atti di Fondazione dell' "Albergo dei fanciulli"* (AFMA-ILG), in *Informatio* 77.

Sardegna Boulevard is the only one still in existence today in the city of Genoa. It is bustling with activities for young people in different types of schools: primary and secondary, technical courses, oratory-youth centre, and more.



Sr. Laura was in that community for less than one year. Before the conclusion of the school year, a letter arrived with her appointment as animator of another distant house, on the shores of another sea in Sicily, Alì Marina.

Five years had passed since the death of Sr. Maddalena Morano, the great pioneer of the FMA mission in that land that was so psychologically and culturally distant.

When Sr. Maddalena arrived there, after a long and eventful journey, soon after the death of Mother Mazzarello, from the point of view of the charism of Mornese, all was still to be invented on the island. When Sr. Maddalena went to heaven on March 26, 1908, there were 18 houses, 143 Sisters, and about 20 novices.

Nine months and two days after her death, "the great earthquake of Messina and Reggio Calabria" took place, snatching the lives of 120,000 people. The epicentre had been in the strait between the two seas, where the mythological monsters Scylla and Charybdis had unleashed their most destructive forces.

When Sr. Laura arrived there, the Alì house had been rebuilt, thanks to the generous and timely interventions of many people.

Alì Marina, today Alì Terme, is thirty kilometres from Messina and is situated between the Ionian Sea and the Peloritani Mountains, in a truly lovely location. In the background were the snow and the tongues of fire of Mount Etna.

The six years spent by Sr. Laura in Alì were marked with an intense daily activity and the tragic events of World War I.

Mary Help of Christians Institute of Alì was carrying on a wide range of educational activities: kindergarten, elementary

school, junior secondary courses, which in those days were called the supplementary school, and upper secondary classes for the formation of teachers. All this was taking place with an adjacent boarding school for girls and young women who were students. There were also the parish catechetical activities and the ever-present festive oratory.

One could not count on financial support from the state, however, there were those who the Sisters liked to call ‘benefactors’. Furthermore, there were no salaries to be paid to external personnel because the Sisters did everything, both because their numbers could not be counted, and because the mentality of the times and places was quite different from that which we experience today.

The Sisters in Ali could not foresee at that time that many years later their animator would have reached what is usually called ‘the glory of the altars’ otherwise, they would have taken note of her every breath, and instead, there is not much information about her.

Some points, however, are presented in the house chronicle that show her completely intent on offering an ever new life service to the Sisters of her community, as well as to the boarders and day students, and the people who gravitated around the parish and institute.

Testimonies released posthumously to the Canonical Processes expand a little on these notes, highlighting her attentive and delicate charity, dedication to the sick, especially during the epidemic of the Spanish Flu, the educational wisdom with which she guided the young Sisters in their relationships with the students, and the positive aspect of her interventions, always aimed more at raising awareness of the good rather than dwelling on the bad.

Never speak to the pupils under the impetus of passion, but always with calm and moderation. Speak softly, and never before having obtained total silence from the group. Whenever you see an

infringement, do not scold a young person then and there, always do so away from her companions; do not use partiality.

While referring to these words of the animator, Sr. Laura Salvo also highlighted a great virtue that all saw in Sr. Laura: that of clemency, able to mitigate sufferings, happy to offer forgiveness, confident of obtaining a new momentum to start again. She concluded with this valuable observation: “Her reproach never caused resentment”.

This was also dealt with in the outline of the conference that she gave at the end of 1916, a terrible time in which they faced a tougher and more catastrophic one: the cold, bloody year of 1917, the year of the Battle of Caporetto and, especially, the Spanish Flu.

Sr. Laura told her Sisters of Ali:

During this new year that is about to begin and which puts before us a dark future, let us try to keep alive the spirit of our Founder. The spirit of the Founder will be the weapon of life against the blackest weapons of death. Let us see if we have true piety, if we are united among ourselves, whether it is a true Gospel spirit that moves us to work, to speak, to sacrifice ourselves, or if it is for our own interest, our need for esteem, praise, if our affections are holy and strong, if our conscience is upright and delicate, and does not voluntarily accept even the smallest act contrary to God’s will, to our duty, or the good of souls.

These were simple words. If one reads them too quickly, they may also be taken for granted, but, if analysed, considering them one by one, these pointed lances take aim at selfishness and egoism, and they can be compared to the bombs and gas that were at those times used on the battlefields.

She lived all this.

With regard to references to Don Bosco Sr. Maria Mazzoli echoes this fundamental phrase of Sr. Laura Meozzi:

I would like to penetrate the mind and heart of our Father Don Bosco, to understand the depth of his spirit, and with that spirit to cast light on every word, gesture, and action.

When she was secretary at Ali Sr. Mazzoli had recorded this sentence, always careful to take note of the conferences of her animator.



With regard to the period of the Spanish Flu an episode has been passed down, a painful, yet beautiful, episode.⁴²

There was a seriously ill Sister who had a very high fever. She felt oppressed by the shadow of death, partly because from her infirmary bed she could hear the constant tolling of the bells calling all who had not fallen victim of the terrible epidemic, to gather for yet another funeral.

She did not want to be alone, and above all she wanted the presence of Sr. Laura.

One day a misunderstanding occurred. Sr. Laura could not be in the infirmary, and the nurse, to reassure the patient, found nothing better to say than, “The superior had to go out”. However, the animator’s voice was heard in the corridor. The sick Sister became furious, and as soon as Sr. Laura approached her bed, the patient gave her a resounding slap.

“You are right; you were deceived. Forgive me for not having come sooner.” Then, as if nothing had happened, she smiled kindly and took her place at the side of the suffering Sister.

For the community of Ali 1916 was a particularly difficult year also from another point of view. It became necessary to proceed to the practices to obtain equal status with the state schools for the teacher training school as had happened in Nizza Monferrato. There was a great need for elementary teachers who were well-formed both on the human level and on that of Christian

⁴² Cf. Grassiano, op.cit. 270.

values. Despite what had been done since the unification of Italy to implement compulsory and free primary school education, many were still illiterate, and the FMA Institute felt that they had been sent on a mission also in this very important area of daily life.

Mary Help of Christians School of Alì, along with its boarding school, had already been in existence for twenty years, and had borne much fruit. Those in charge, however, felt the need to have it emerge from the closed circle of private institutions, also to be able to open it to accept more non-paying students.

Sr. Laura was the animator, but to prepare for the ministerial inspections a full-time person was necessary. Sr. Linda Lucotti was, therefore, sent to the place as principal.⁴³

The two most responsible, Sr. Linda and Sr. Laura, worked hard, and in perfect harmony, together with the teachers, pupils, and their families, and arrived at the goal with all their documents in order. However, when the time came, it seemed almost to fade into nothingness. The government inspectors were slow to arrive.

The entire month of June passed, and they did not appear. So it was even in July. The students were sweating over their books; the Sisters were trying in every way to keep them happy, which certainly could not have been easy.

Yet, those pupils did not give up. They voluntarily remained at their desks and even the boarders did not leave, and that was a very serious sacrifice.

The inspection finally took place from August 20–24. The positive outcome was communicated by the government authorities on September 29.

This took place, as has been previously mentioned, during the deplorable time of war. From the beginning of the hostilities, the Sisters of the general council had launched an appeal. The Sisters

⁴³ Born at Mede Lomellina in 1879, died in Torino 1957. During the last ten years of her life she was superior general.

who were recognised as having the necessary skills would do well to obtain official permission to be able to serve, in an emergency, in military hospitals.

Sr. Laura, who was already highly qualified, was one of these. After the difficult months of the school inspection for equal standing, she wrote to Mother General, Mother Caterina Daghero a filial plea to be chosen, among the fortunate ones who would be assigned to a field hospital.

Her application was not accepted because there were other expectations of her. She was to continue in the task of animating the community and the educational works that needed to be further consolidated in Sicily.

During that same year, 1916, Mamma Angela died. She had been ill for at least two years, and had suffered a great deal asking the Lord Jesus to be able to, "do her purgatory in this life".

In 1914, she fell seriously ill. Sr. Laura, and her sister Rita, were then sent to Livorno by their respective provincials and remained there for some time.

The written memoirs of Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak state, "The sick woman marvelled at the refined nature of her daughter, and she said that Laura knew how to foresee her needs and desires. She felt like she was being served by an angel".

While Sr. Rita returned to her community on April 30, nothing is known about how long Sr. Laura stayed with her mother. However, toward the end of the month Mamma Angela felt a little better.

There is no exact information about what happened in 1916 except that the mother of the Meozzi sisters died in full acceptance of the will of the Lord, and that her body was buried in the cemetery of Livorno.

Sr. Laura, "A Sicilian woman"

In the summer of 1918, following the brilliant results of the state examinations taken by the students of the recently recognised

school, and shortly before the guns of World War I were silenced, Sr. Laura was called elsewhere. She moved to Catania, where since 1896 a multifaceted work had been established by Mother Maddalena Morano and had grown over the years in all its pastoral and educational potential.

Sr. Laura went there as animator and remained for three years. Then, from September 1921 to the summer of the following year, she was animator at Nunziata Mascali, on the slopes of Mt. Etna.

She had become truly Sicilian!

Sr. Adele Marchese lived with her for a fairly long time, first at Ali, and later at Catania.

Her testimonies, which are a little unusual and even somewhat surprising, present Sr. Laura as a leader who was not only full of kindness and understanding, an ‘angel of charity’, as several other Sisters have said. She was always ready to listen, to encourage, to help, but one who was also capable of striking the tree at its roots, when this was necessary, or at least offering a clear opportunity to help grow in gospel commitment.

Here is an example:

Sr. Adele, an artist, had carved from raw wood a crucified Jesus which was very dear to her. She always kept it with her, even at night. She was enthusiastic, almost passionate about it.

One afternoon, while she was in the classroom of the technical school, busy preparing work for the pupils, she saw her animator arrive. It was a pleasant visit. They spoke together about some educational problems, then Sr. Laura said:

Be generous, Sr. Adele. Take up your cross and offer it to him, Jesus. He will imprint his image on your heart. See, the fire is burning in the stove. Take your crucifix, kiss it and throw it into the fire. Jesus will set you on fire with his love.

Sr. Adele understood everything; she burned the cross and felt profoundly liberated.

Other things were also burned. "Letters I held to be so precious," says Sr. Adele. One might not approve especially when hearing that these letters were from Fr. Cagliero, Fr. Rua, Fr. Albera. But this was the reality. Sr. Laura certainly knew the reason why. Perhaps she could read the heart of that Sister, and realised that this was the better way.

"Even the notebook in which I wrote my spiritual reflections, everything was destroyed, because God alone was to reign in my heart."

It is to be noted that at her death, Sr. Laura left no personal writings.

Sincere, genuine love was enough for everything. She did not want paraphernalia of any kind.

She said:

If I love God, I love my neighbour and if I love my neighbour, I love God. If I live my life for my neighbour, I give my life to the Lord. But if I do not love my neighbour, if I deny them my forgiveness, if I keep hatred and resentment...

And the love of neighbour is not merely a feeling of affection that inclines us toward people who are agreeable and congenial. It is instead, directed to people as images of God. It is a love that does not exclude anyone, not even those who have faults or who are ungrateful. All prayer, fasting, and sacramental acts are useless if they remain separated from fraternal love. Our love of neighbour should be consistent with that of Jesus for us. Did he not excuse his executioners? And how did he behave with Judas and the Apostle Peter? And with us? How much he has given us! And yet we are guilty.



Sr. Laura's years in Catania were also marked by dark, devastating events, such as epidemics that sapped a Sister's strength and led to the death of two young girls at the school. Then there were those who, annoyed by the Sisters' activities for the advancement of women, tried at first to damage their reputation with lies, later moving on boldly to threats and intimidation.

Between one thing and another, Sr. Laura fell ill. She remained in a hospital for a month, then had to remain out of the community for a rigorous convalescence prescribed by doctors. It was, perhaps, because of a lung disease since the records speak of the Clementi Sanatorium.

In Catania Sr. Laura encouraged the development of the Past Pupils Association. At one point, they wanted to build a beautiful lava stone Lourdes grotto.

More funds were needed for the project because what they had received was not enough. One day Sr. Laura said to the aforementioned Sr. Adele Marchese, “Get ready to go out. You have to go knocking on the doors of your acquaintances asking for money for the grotto”.

“To beg? I am too timid; I would never be able to do that.”

Sr. Laura looked up at a picture of the Sacred Heart, “O Lord, you see how weak is the faith of this daughter!”

Eventually, they went together, Sr. Adele because she knew the people of Catania, Sr. Laura because she had the courage to ask. She did so with such grace, with such a humble, noble attitude that no one could ever refuse her.



Her appointment to the school at Nunziata arrived on September 30, 1921.

Nunziata is a town in the province of Catania, in the municipality of Mascali, which dominates a good part of the Ionian coastline from a height of 200 metres on the slopes of Mt. Etna. It has a view of the sea, and the mountains with their lava rocks, citrus groves, and many other wonders to behold.

There Sr. Laura found a community of ten Sisters, devoted to the education of the children of the kindergarten, elementary school and the multicoloured world of a lively oratory. The work was established in 1892 by the Parish Priest, Fr. Angelo Patané, in

collaboration with the Bishop of Acireale, Gerlando Genuardi. Thirty years later, the Sisters continued to be a strong reference point in the pastoral life of the whole parish.

Sr. Laura found herself in a pleasant environment but remained there less than a year. Why?

Here are the facts.

In August 1922 Sr. Laura travelled through Italy by train to reach Nizza Monferrato because she had been elected delegate from the province to General Chapter VIII. This event took place from September 8-18.

She never returned to her previous assignment, and the Sisters, who had seen her leave with joy, thinking that this participation in a great event of the Institute was also a privilege for them, remained cloaked in suffering and had to struggle to accept this decision.



They later came to know that she had only taken the ‘wrong train’. She had boarded one that, huffing and puffing, took her to Poland.

Chapter Two

POLAND: THE POWER OF A SEED IN A FRUITFUL FIELD

Don Bosco's fingerprint in Poland

Could Don Bosco speak Polish? He would have needed all the languages of the world.

The world was too small for him. While waiting to travel to other planets, for example, Mars, he needed the whole atlas of the world, because there were young people to be saved at every latitude and longitude.

Don Bosco was helped by a prince; a genuine blue-blooded prince who had the privilege of bearing seven names. He was called, August, Franciszek, Maria, Anna, Józef, Kajetan.

He belonged to the Czartoryski family. His father was called Ladislaw and he was one of the most illustrious representatives of the high Polish nobility. His mother, María Amparo Muñoz, was the daughter of Queen Maria Cristina of Spain, and her second husband.

The family of the Czartoryski princes could trace its roots back to the first half of the 16th century. In fact, they descended from the great Lithuanian sovereign Algirdas, whose empire stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, reaching within about fifty miles of the already powerful city of Moscow.

As a boy, August's grandfather, Adam Jerzy, had assisted at the second and third division of Poland and, in 1795, he saw it vanish from the map. Thirty-five years later, having become a very active statesman, he took part in a revolt against Russia, becoming head of the provisional government. When the insurrection failed,

he was condemned to death, but managed to escape to Paris where he lived in exile.

It was there in Paris that the first-born child of his son Ladislaw, Prince August, was born on August 2, 1858. He was destined by Providence to be a Salesian and a shining star of holiness.

August's early life was not a very happy one. When he was six years of age he lost his mother, who departed for heaven as a result of tuberculosis. He was to inherit this insidious germ. However, he also inherited other qualities from her: gentleness of spirit, a tendency to go to the essential, and strength in vocational choices that was capable of overcoming any difficulty.

He had to learn to live with illness, which at times, made inroads. He was sent to different climates in search of health to Italy, Switzerland, Egypt, and Spain, but he was more interested in living a transparent relationship with God.

While still an adolescent, he was already sure that court life was not for him. He wanted to consecrate himself to the Lord.

For three years, 1874 to 1877, he had a tutor who understood him and accompanied him in his choices. He was the saintly Fr.Józef Kalinowski, who has been canonised as St. Raffaele of St.Joseph.⁴⁴

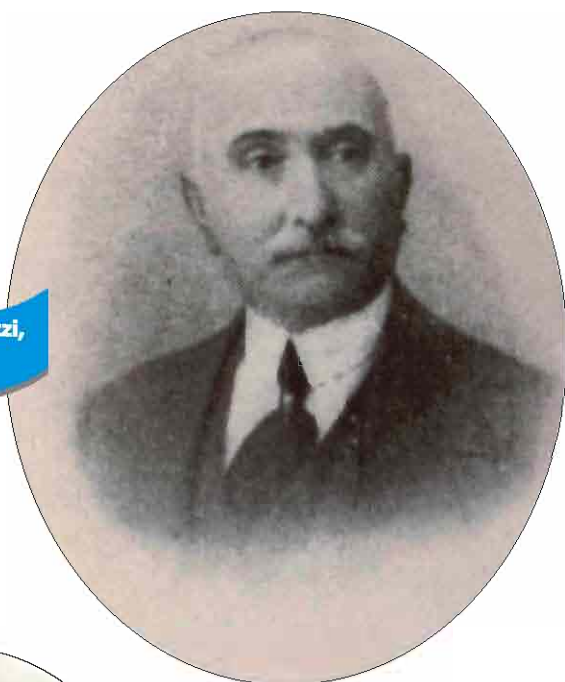
In 1883, Prince August met another saint, called Don Bosco. He met him in Paris, in his own home and he wanted to remain with him.

One can well imagine the difficulties this young nobleman had to overcome! But he succeeded.

How did they meet? This is how it happened.

⁴⁴ He had been first a military engineer and a staff captain, and then for ten years, a prisoner condemned to forced labour in Siberia, where he had secretly kept the Gospels and a crucifix as his treasures. He was able to return to Poland in 1873 and four years later he entered a Carmelite monastery. He became a priest and dedicated himself totally to the ministry of Reconciliation.

**Cavaliere Alessandro Meozzi,
Laura's father**



**Angela Meozzi nee Mazzoni,
Laura's mother**



Florence, her birthplace



**Florence, the Baptistery that
Dante called "My beautiful
St. John"**



**Youthful joy of
horseback riding**



The novitiate of Nizza Monferrato



**Varazze, an apostolate marked
by suffering**



Sr. Laura, 'a Sicilian woman'



Mother Laura Meozzi



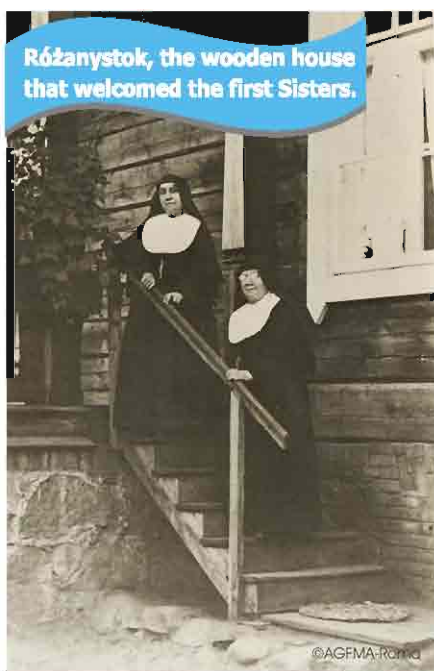
Poland, the power of a seed. Front row, from left to right: Maria Mazzoli, Laura Meozzi, Anna Walenga. Second row: Anna Ścisłowska, Anna Juzek, Francesca Barucco



**The "Hill of Roses",
Our Lady who awaits and blesses**



Różanystok, the shrine



**Another great protector, the
Salesian, Cardinal Augustus
Hlond**



The house of Vilnius



The house of Laurów

Laurów, pupils as joyful workers



Sokolów Podlaski, when war was about to break out

Włocławek 4/8 1935.

L. M. M. 4-2-35

Włocławek 4/8 1935.

Letter of Mother Laura to Mother General, Mother Luisa Vaschetti (1935).

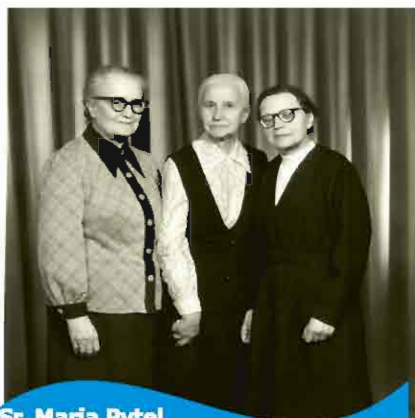
Mi telegramea spurs seguita con questa mia, che si il regime ci ha proprio fatto. Come la rimise nell'ultima mia ma era e tanto profusione del 6 agosto 1934, venne colpita da polmonite dopo; si spense come già le avevano detto che una fosse gravissima e incombente, si spense nell'interferenza di Madre Marcella che ispirasse la crisi, e dissi il vero che gran da l'altro in il dolore non ci divide non che un pietosissimo segno di speranza, in questa non ha fratelli anima che Madre Marcella si anche fatto la gioia, ma

per far tutte le mie figlie, ma il solo pensare che io la rimando alle sue figlie mi i di vero sollievo. Ammalata ne mi sono amma lacerata in casa, febbrilanti e bimb ed anche qualche cosa, ma che cosa dire qui in Polonia la griffe, e un male di tutti gli uomini, e quindi subito a grande velocità, si sono delle cose governative con pienamente delle parti bimb, insegnano le ammalate. Terminò quella mia, nel tanto altro la polmonite delle mie anche figlie da anche casa non solo di Włocławek, ma anche le altre che sono vor' qui sono rimbalzate dall'influenza come le altre a due nell'ultima mia.

Saluto con affetto intimo, sempre rievocando le figlie ed Anna Maria S. M. M.



**Wrocław, one of the last houses
opened by Mother Laura.**



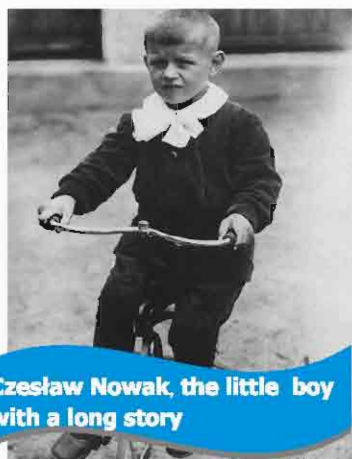
**Sr. Maria Pytel
(first on the left) with two Sisters
not named in the book: Stefania
Ladigaite and Magdalena Bielsskite**



**World War II, Mother Laura in
almost military garb**



Pupils of Laurów repatriated to Pawlowice



**Czesław Nowak, the little boy
with a long story**



Cemetery of Pogrzebień, the place to which the people immediately flocked to pray to 'the saint'



Matylda Sikorska, second leader of the Polish Province



The house from which the Lord called Mother Laura to himself



A choir sings in the Cathedral of Wrocław to intercede for the beatification of Mother Laura (January 14, 2003, 130th anniversary of her birth)

In 1883, for four long months, Don Bosco travelled around France, looking for help, giving the blessing of Mary Help of Christians, and beseeching her to scatter miraculous signs here and there.

On May 18, he was the guest of the Czartoryski family. In the palace chapel, the two princes, father and son, served his Mass. Then Don Bosco said to August, “For a long time I have wanted to make your acquaintance, prince”.

These might seem to be strange words, but perhaps there was a touch of prophecy in them. When one is dealing with saints, one never knows.

Three years later, the two princes were in Turin. Prince Ladislaw asked Don Bosco to do something for the young people of Poland. He replied, “We’ll come as soon as we have suitable personnel”. Fr. Francesia, who was present at this conversation, in a reverent yet joking tone, turned to August saying, “You come, prince, and become a Salesian. In this way, Don Bosco will be able to provide for Poland immediately”.

They smiled, but...

Prince August, who had already considered the Jesuits and the Carmelites, felt clearly and precisely what his calling would be.

Don Bosco did not say ‘yes’ immediately; it was necessary to act with caution with persons of that kind. However, a few months later, Pope Leo XIII responded to the doubts of the young Pole with these sure words, “Return to Turin, and present yourself to Don Bosco. Bring him the Pope’s blessing and tell him that it is my desire that you be received among the Salesians. Be persevering and pray”.

His father, who was not happy with this decision, was not present at his priestly ordination at Alassio on April 2, 1892. However, a month later, on May 3, the whole Czartoryski family participated in one of his Masses at Mentone. They all received Jesus from the hands of August, who was more a prince than ever.

The following year, on April 9, toward evening, young Fr.Czartoryski went to the Lord forever. The tuberculosis that had undermined his whole life, won in the end.

But in what sense was it victorious?

According to the Salesian Bulletin of the time, there were 120 young Polish men present at the funeral of the priest-prince. They told Princess Marcellina, aunt of the deceased, that they had gone to Turin to become Salesians. They had been drawn by example, the example of their illustrious countryman, who had become poor for Christ, even though he was the uncontested heir to a principality that seemed destined to become a monarchy. He had not only made himself poor, he had also vowed unconditional obedience and that gift of self that finds its roots only in the choice of consecrated chastity.

Prince August Czartoryski was declared blessed by his countryman, Pope John Paul II, in Rome on April 25, 2004.



There had been Polish Salesians since the end of the 1880s. They lived scattered throughout various places on the map of Europe. Salesians in Poland, instead, only began when, in 1898, Fr. Michele Rua decided to open the first house in that martyred land, the house of Oświęcim. Yes, it was precisely in that city, perhaps better known today by the infamous German form of its name, Auschwitz.

In a similar manner, the first FMA vocations from among Polish women were also exiles from their homeland, like Francesca Ocieпка, Maria Fiegel, Anna Walenga, who made their religious profession in Nizza Monferrato in 1896. Others followed, spreading out to America, France, Belgium, Spain, as well as to Italy. They, too, awaited the hour of God that would bring freedom to their country once more, so that, alongside their Salesian confreres, they might have Polish Sisters working in Poland.

The Hill of Roses – perfumed roses among sharp thorns

The year 1922 was an important one for the FMA Institute. They called it the year of gold. It was, in fact, their jubilee year, the fiftieth anniversary of the life of that charism, born in Mornese and now spread to various parts of the world.

Four years had passed since the end of World War I, which had caused such ruin, cut short so many lives, and violently interrupted so many educational initiatives. It was necessary to make a fresh start, with enthusiasm, sacrifice and confidence in Mary Help of Christians. It was she, who up to that time, had done everything, and she would surely continue to protect the works and guide the development of new ones.

In full harmony with the invitations and exhortations of the Rector Major, Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, those who led the Institute turned their hopes toward previously unthought-of horizons.

Among these was Poland.

It was spoken of from the very first interventions at General Chapter VIII and, two days after the opening, on September 6 to be precise, an extraordinary meeting of the general council was held in Nizza to deal with this topic. The rector major was also present. It was decided to proceed with the first Polish foundation, “within two months at most”. Already on the previous May 24, Fr. Rinaldi had sent a letter to the FMA Institute, highlighting what, with the protection and encouragement of Mary Help of Christians, had already been accomplished and what was being done during the fiftieth anniversary year. He encouraged them to undertake a new expansion of their work for the spread of the Gospel.

As has been mentioned, the SDB had been in Poland for quite some time. After the very early period, that of August Czartoryski, houses were opened in the country. Technically, they belonged to the Austro-Hungarian province and then, from 1919, they became autonomous, with the birth of the SDB Polish Province.

The provincial of that new territory was the courageous missionary, Fr. Pietro Tirone, who immediately requested the presence of the Sisters. He wanted them at Rózanystok, where the Salesians had arrived in November 1919.

In that city the war had left serious suffering in its wake. There were many abandoned girls and many orphans who lacked everything.

Sr. Laura was forty-nine years old, and that was no small matter in those times! She was chosen to lead the expedition because she had accumulated a wide range of essential experiences, which, strengthened by her openness to the Lord, would help her to deal with the difficulties of an, as yet, unknown life situation.

Sr. Laura's 'yes' was prompt and total. In the past, she had expressed her desire for missionary life. That desire had certainly been left to mature for a long time!

There at Nizza she immediately started to prepare for departure, only sending her Sicilian Sisters a rapid farewell letter, perhaps a 'registered express', if they used that expression.

There is no need to try to comment on how the Sisters felt. Their animator was not only leaving them, but she did not even return for a few days, to say goodbye individually and perhaps to dry a few tears.

Something like that would certainly not happen today, but in those times, Sicily was still very far away. A quick visit by plane was not yet possible. It was necessary to take heart and say 'yes'.

Perhaps, Sr. Laura did not even think of it, but her departure was not just toward the unknown. It was also a completely new beginning. At almost fifty she had to learn to speak a new language, and with all those consonants together in a bunch.



On October 30, 1922, just over a month from the first decision, the little group crossed the threshold of the generalate in Nizza and set out toward the northeast of the Italian peninsula.

Sr. Laura was accompanied by the companion of her younger days, Sr. Maria Mazzoli. She had been called from Rome where she had been provincial secretary for a short time. There was one other Italian Sister, Francesca Barucco, from Cuneo, who was the youngest of the group, being only one year professed.

They did not know a word of Polish. There were three other Sisters with them, whose surnames were very significant: Sr. Anna Juzek, Sr. Anna Walenga and Sr. Anna Ścisłowska. They had emigrated a long time before from Poland to different countries, and had been called to meet in Italy at that important moment. These Sisters were very well-prepared to support the fatigue of teaching and interpreting, because, beginning with their novitiate, they had also spoken Italian for many years.



Here is a brief sketch of these three Sisters.

- Anna Juzek had remained an orphan at an early age. A priest uncle, took her in and cared for her along with her older sister and brother. Anna and her sister attended a boarding school in Italian speaking Switzerland, reserved for girls of a high social class and administered by the French Nôtre Dame Sisters. Later, she completed her studies in France, and there she met the Salesian Sisters. She was attracted by their family-like simplicity and their profoundly Eucharistic spirituality. She entered in Marseilles. Later she was in Italy, in Nizza and Rome. In 1920 she was sent to the United States, where she carried out a fervent apostolate among the Polish immigrants. She was also a gifted organist.

When she was called for the foundation of the Institute in Poland, she was well-prepared, being fluent in several languages.

- Anna Walenga's youthful journey from Poland toward Turin, in order to go to the novitiate in Nizza Monferrato, was both very

adventurous and filled with danger. There were two other young women with her. After profession, she worked in various Italian houses, always as a cook, until in 1922 she was able to return to her own country as a pioneer.

- Anna Ścisłowska belonged to a farming family. She got to know of the existence of the FMA through a group of other young Poles who read the Salesian Bulletin. She arrived in Turin alone, with few clothes and without knowing a word of Italian, "Saying only, 'Bosco! Bosco!'" A stationmaster got her to Valdocco, and there Anna began her new life. After profession, she lived in Genoa, Italy, in the small town of Muri, Switzerland, and in Liege, France, until the historic year of 1922 brought her back to Poland.



The little group of future founders was finally complete with bags and baggage. Laura, Maria, Francesca, and the three Annas set out, hearts burning with generosity and vibrant with hope. They were like six grains of wheat on an authentic Gospel adventure.

They left toward evening. Were they going toward the darkness or toward a new and unforgettable dawn?

In a memoir Sr. Francesca Barucco⁴⁵ wrote, "After having supper with the reverend mothers and receiving their last councils and an affectionate embrace, trusting in the help of heaven, we went to the station to leave for Milan".

On November 2, the new missionaries went on to Venice. From there, after many transfers and a long succession of trains through Austria and Czechoslovakia, they would reach the latitude of 55° north.

That was the program, but whoever planned it forgot to add, as is done in any respectable day's itinerary, the words, "...unplanned events possible". In fact, the adventures began at once and were not exactly pleasant or amusing: missed connections, delays,

⁴⁵ Sr. Francesca Barucco (1893-1975). Professed at Arignano, in the province of Turin in 1921. In 1922 she left for Poland. She returned to Italy at the beginning of World War II and died at Agliè on February 10, 1975.

transfers, unscheduled stops, cold, difficulty in finding food, especially in stations still partly in ruins as a result of the recent war. The journey grew ever longer and seemed eternal.

At the Tarvisio Pass the travellers left the Italian train for an Austrian one, that was to take them to Vienna. With them was a Polish priest, Fr. Wojciech Kuczewski, who was coming from Brazil.

They set off again in the depths of a freezing night and on November 5, they reached Oświęcim. The SDB Rector, Fr. Jan Świerc, was waiting for them under a constant sleet. With great agility, he bounded onto the train and took charge of the luggage. Then he led the Sisters to the Institute of St. Hyacinth,⁴⁶ where they were given a friendly welcome by the confreres along with about 400 boarders.

Given the late season, it was still dark, but even in those pre-dawn hours the reception was joyful and animated by a musical band.

This was followed by Mass, their first on Polish soil. It was celebrated by Fr. Wojciech Kuczewski and marked the Sisters' total offering. Sr. Laura was close to fifty, and the unknown loomed before her. Her roots had already grown strong and deep and she had to uproot them from familiar soil. Would they thrive in this land that was still so unknown?

Another journey followed: 200 kilometres to Warsaw, going ever north, across the immense plain on which the mists were resting softly, and the land was gradually turning white under early snowfalls.

The Sisters were not alone. They were still accompanied and encouraged by the previously mentioned SDB Rector, Fr. Jan

⁴⁶ This first SDB house in Poland was opened by Fr. Rua in 1898. However, at that time the area was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was dedicated to St. Hyacinth because it was situated beside an historic church dedicated to this saint. This was later entrusted to the SDB for their priestly ministry.

Świerc. When they presented themselves to the Apostolic Nuncio, he, in turn, was profuse in expressing his fatherly gratitude.

The next day they faced another 300 kilometres, always going north, or rather, northeast, until they reached the border with Lithuania. They arrived at Grodno, and for the next stretch they had to use two farm carts padded with hay, and there was always the luggage to be transported.

They finally arrived at Rózanystok, their destination. It was the afternoon of November 8. The landscape was hidden by a heavy veil of piercing sleet.

However, the SDB were there with all their boys, both the boarders and those of the state school, together with their teachers and the few people who lived in that isolated place.

They were all very poor. For their house, the Sisters had a wooden hut that was almost totally bare. The furniture and other essentials had been given by the local people, who were more than happy to have the Sisters, but who had very few surplus goods to share.

Winter had already begun and this was a great challenge for the three Italians. For Sr. Laura in particular, it must be remembered that Sicily, where she had come from, was situated at 38° north of the equator, and here they were close to 55°. Yet, as community animator, she had to encourage the others.

Poverty was everywhere in Poland, but perhaps it was worse there on the border with Russia.

After World War I, Poland had regained its independence, but in the eastern areas, tension with Russia was still felt to be very oppressive. It continued to be so for a long time with alternate incursions and conflicts, up until 1921, and the Battle of Warsaw, also known as, 'the miracle of the Vistula'. This led to the Polish occupying part of Belarus, the Lithuanian territory of Vilnius, and some areas of the Ukraine. Russia, now completely taken up with its own internal revolution, gave up and agreed to change the borders.

That was how these missionaries found the country. All of their greatness was concentrated in a 'yes' that knew neither limits nor ways of escape.



Rózanystok means, 'hill of roses'. The centre of its life is the shrine, which now bears the title of Mother of God, Help of Christians. It had a long and troubled history.

Around the middle of the 17th century a wealthy man had commissioned a painting of Our Lady. He placed it in his private chapel that he made into a small prayer centre.

The image was beautiful wearing a rose-coloured dress and a marbled blue mantle, bordered with pearls. She held the smiling child in her arms, and had a sceptre in her right hand. He, in turn, clasped the Gospel to his heart, and pointed to his Mother with his little hand.

The image was never without flowers.

However, the winter of 1658 had been very harsh. Everything froze and the wealthy man could no longer find flowers; nor could he decide to throw away those he had. Every day he would say, "tomorrow", but that tomorrow never came. Actually, the withered blossoms gradually began to revive, straightened up on their stems, and became more beautiful than ever.

The fact did not remain a secret, and so the local people began to go to that private chapel. They saw, prayed, and received graces and favours. It seemed to them that Our Lady and Child were there, alive for them.

Therefore, a wooden church was built and entrusted to the Dominicans. The wealthy man left all his vast estate to these religious.

Later, at the beginning of the following century, the church, which had already been restored and extended, was replaced by a grandiose shrine. This drew increasing numbers of devotees and pilgrims.

Things remained like this for many, many years, and then, toward the end of the 19th century, someone who considered himself more majestic than the painting of Our Lady came on the scene; none other than the Czar of all of Russia. It was Czar Nicolas I, of the great Romanov dynasty. However his ability to understand different peoples and tolerate diversity was not as great as his title. What he feared most were the liberal movements that were already threatening absolutism in Europe. It was necessary to apply the brakes and to follow a uniform lifestyle everywhere.

“Autocracy, orthodoxy, nationalism” These three words came down like an axe also on the people of Rózanystok, which was a tiny part of the 20,000,000 square kilometres over which Nicolas ruled. Although it was so small that one would need a microscope to see it, it irritated him, irritated his vanity. So he intervened also there, with his dogmatic commands. It was no longer possible to declare oneself Catholic at Rózanystok; it was necessary to join the Orthodox Church.

Thus, in 1845 the Dominicans were expelled and the shrine was entrusted to the authority of a Russian Orthodox clergyman and his monks.

They did their best to distance the people from the Catholic faith, but without success. Then the Russian government decided to begin with the children, so they sent an Orthodox community of women to Rózanystok to care for them.

Money was not lacking. Buildings were constructed equipped with every convenience, “...electric lighting, laundry, clothes dryer and ironing facilities. There was even a hatchery for fish”, as Domenica Grassiano wrote:

Between Orthodox Sisters and girls, they numbered 500. They had farm workers to cultivate their land and offered monetary gifts to anyone who turned to them, on condition that they abandon the Catholic religion.

Then, when World War I broke out, these Sisters had to leave. They returned to Russia and everything fell into ruin. For its part,

the outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution further contributed to the ruin and destruction.

By the time the Sisters arrived after the war, Catholics could make themselves known as such. Rózanystok now belonged to Poland.

On November 11, 1919, the SDB arrived there, invited by the Apostolic Nuncio, Bishop Achille Ratti.

Much work was needed to repair the vandalism caused by so much hatred.

The Salesians had to struggle but they gradually succeeded in developing the technical schools. The ANS website (Salesian News Agency) reveals how, "...at the height of its glory (i. e. in the 1930s) the Salesian community numbered thirty-five religious, between priests, coadjutors and clerics doing their practical training", and that, "400 boys were preparing for the trades of farmers, gardeners, blacksmiths, carpenters, and shoemakers".

The buildings at Rózanystok, including the shrine, the parish premises, the hospital, boarding facility and schools, made up the main village of the area. Around it, at a distance of a few kilometres, were fourteen other groups of houses, where the 'local people' lived.

These people were poor and exhausted by World War I and the consequences of the Bolshevik revolution. They were Catholics and Orthodox, the majority Polish, with a Russian minority.

It was a difficult and delicate field of apostolate, particularly because of the demoralised state to which the events of recent decades had reduced the population.

Despite all the difficulties, the Salesians were well-liked because of their capacity for simple, authentic relationships with people and their tenacious and intelligent spirit of service. Almost immediately the people began to feel the need for the Sisters.

The first FMA arrived on November 8, 1922. Three of them had been sent to face the unknown, while the other three were in a certain sense 'returning'. Why, 'in a certain sense'? Because, for a

long time, they had lived in very different parts of the world. They did, however, possess one treasure: they were able to speak the Polish language.

In reality, a Polish heart was also needed, and all possessed this, either by nature or by the grace of their missionary obedience.

All had to fight the sense of being lost that threatened to hold them in its grasp. They looked to Our Lady and said, "Let's get started!"

For the Italians, getting started also meant poring over books. It was absolutely necessary to study the Polish language, because the Italian and Polish languages are so different. In the SDB house, they found a patient and understanding teacher.

The three 'Annas' instead gave all their care to the kitchen, laundry and other needs, taking on the direction of work in the house already occupied by the SDB and the boarders. Sr. Anna Juzek, in particular, being a capable business woman, also dedicated herself to dealing with documents and all the other legal requirements.



Looking at the image of Our Lady, Sr. Laura found it ruined, discoloured, and ugly, and immediately took paint brushes in hand. Her fingers might have been stiff with chilblains, but her heart was more agile than ever. She repainted the image of the Madonna, giving it new vitality!

Unfortunately, that image was no longer the original. It was a copy that the Orthodox Sisters, on their return to Russia, had left in place of the much-loved and venerated original, which the revolutionary squads might have desecrated or even destroyed, in order to take the precious silver with which it was covered.

On a page written in her own hand, Sr. Laura composed this simple prayer:

Ave, Maria. Thank you for your help and aid. I confide in you, O my Mother, and I will always do so, because you are my mother

and the Mother of God. Save my soul and also give me good health, if it is God's will.

But why health? Sr. Laura, in addition to her already familiar asthma crises, was tormented by an insistent earache. Chilblains arrived soon after. However, she never gave up, but immersed herself immediately in a sea of activity. Two days after their arrival, she began to think about some kitchen equipment, because they would not be able to continue to accept the invitation to eat with their Salesian brothers for long. Besides, it was also necessary to put in order the wooden cabins that would be used for the schools and sewing room. Thus, Sr. Laura began to move from one building to the other, among piles of snow, unlike anything she had ever seen in her life.

Then there were administrative procedures to be seen to as soon as possible, and here, at Sr. Laura's side was the capable Sr. Anna Juzek. It was necessary to acquire ownership of the military hospital as soon as possible, since it was in a dangerous state of abandonment. They could establish an orphanage there. A state official had promised the necessary funds for the restoration, recognising it as an urgent public need, since at the time there were too many orphaned infants and children. Among them, it was necessary to include the children whose parents had been deported to Russia or Siberia in previous years. Those children had been forcibly sent back to Poland and this was a doubly cruel choice for them.

The Sisters went to live in what had been the house of the Orthodox clergyman. They were really cold. The wood with which they filled the stove was never enough, also because the walls had absorbed the seasonal dampness of many years.

They felt like orphans, because they had no pupils to assist or to educate. They had much work, but they could not fully carry out their mission. Waiting is agonising for everyone. It was particularly so in that dark, cold, nordic winter for that little group of women. They had thrown themselves headlong into the dream of transplanting Mornese to Poland.

None of them were, however, the least bit frustrated. They knew that everything one lives in the name of love is underwritten by God. A letter from Sr. Anna Juzek to mother general written in the early days of January 1923, spoke of the, “*mission of waiting because the orphans are not yet here*”.

Children: Lives stunted by suffering

Christmas of 1922 arrived. The SDB had succeeded in setting up a little chapel in the Sisters’ house. It was inaugurated with the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Then gifts began to arrive: the poor and humble ones that Sr. Laura had managed to prepare, but also one that was big and full of joy.

It was the living gift of three courageous young women who gave hope for a new future. They had left Oświęcim as soon as the news came of the imminent arrival of the Sisters, and while waiting, they had undertaken whatever work was needed at the SDB Institute. They really hoped to be accepted as candidates by the FMA.

Two of these were Rozalia Szczerbowska and Julia Janus, and they did become Sisters. The third was called Magdalena, but her surname is not known. According to the verbal statement of Sr. Maria Pytel, she later took a different path. They were always smiling, even when they had to bend their backs under the weight of tiring work, like chopping wood for the kitchen, for example. They were not accustomed to such work or to that naked poverty, but they felt happier than ever before.

On Christmas Eve a fourth young woman arrived. She was called Janina, was eighteen years old and, she brought with her a recently granted teaching diploma.

All these hopes for the future were presented to Sr. Laura during the Midnight Mass.



Meanwhile, there were other changes. Sr. Anna Walenga assumed full responsibility for the kitchen of the SDB. It was no easy task, because there were 500 boys with huge appetites while personnel to help was always in short supply. Fortunately, the candidate Julia had attended a school for culinary arts, from which she had acquired a brilliant diploma. Naturally, she was immediately placed alongside Sr. Anna.

Sr. Laura was very pleased. This service gave her and the Sisters an opportunity to express their thanks to the SDB in a tangible way for having welcomed them with such affability.

Life continued like this until almost the end of winter. Work, prayer, and sacrifice to the highest degree. This, along with a friendly, cheerful smile for everyone, formed the whole mission that the Sisters and candidates undertook at Rózanystok.

That smile cost a lot. In later times Sr. Laura confessed, “If it were not for the love of God and of Poland, I would have returned to Italy immediately”.

The people who were mainly farmers, watched them. They came from the various farmsteads for ten o’clock Mass every Sunday, wearing heavy jackets made from sheep or goatskin, with the fleece turned inwards. They all had their heads covered, because the cold was biting. The women used very thick shawls; the men wore turkish style fur caps with twirling tassels.

Mass was followed immediately by Vespers and Benediction, because it was not possible to expect the people to return to church in the evening.

There was a sad and unexpected departure in the last days of the year. Sr. Anna Juzek had to go in haste to her uncle, a priest, in Upper Silesia, far to the southeast, to assist him during a serious illness. In March, this uncle departed for heaven. He had been so much in admiration of the dedication with which Sr. Anna had assisted him, that he left her everything he owned.

It was, in fact, only some furniture and perhaps a very modest sum of money, but for the house of Rózanystok, it was still a providential help.

In that house poverty reigned as queen, and it brought joy with it. The *Notiziario* of the Institute also noted this, and wrote:

That new mission will certainly flourish because poverty is not lacking. This is the distinguishing characteristic that Don Bosco desired for all his new works. The Sisters write: ‘We are very happy’.⁴⁷

Spring arrived, and with it, Lent began. It seemed that Lent was endless, but it did not take on the colours of the desert because the Sisters, with that cheerful group of young postulants, continued their intense apostolic preparation: the study of the language, restoration, and cleaning.

Sr. Laura kept the morale of her varied community high:

Let us grasp with joy every opportunity to show our love for Jesus, our good will, the great desire to become holy. Let us work untiringly to enrich our souls with the most precious pearls, like humility, charity, submission, serenity in all events. Let us always seek the Lord; let us seek him in sacrifice, keeping for ourselves the part that we find tiresome, that we do not like, that disturbs us.

She spoke Italian and Sr. Anna Juzek translated for the postulants. Here and there, however, Sr. Laura herself already slipped in some words in Polish, and those words made history.

“*Panienko, zimno?* (Cold, Miss?),” and immediately Sr. Laura offered her a little cup of coffee.



However, the orphans were slow in arriving. Among the persons of authority in the government who were to honour their

⁴⁷ *Notiziario delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, dicembre 1922.

promises with a favourable signature there was one who did not favour the Sisters. He never managed to dip his pen into the ink.

In reality the state also faced great economic problems. In fact, Poland was exhausted by the war and was having great difficulty providing bread and a roof for all its returned refugees. The public coffers were empty and inflation was sky-high.

In that year of 1923, Easter fell on April 1. On that day the Sisters also received the long awaited news that, like the Resurrection, their mission could at last begin. The prefect of Białystok on whom Różanystok depended, knocked at their door. He wanted to see the situation personally, to see what point the restoration had reached, because the opposing official had finally said yes, even though it was accompanied by profound sighs. By this time, notwithstanding all the difficulties it was necessary to open a house for all of the poor orphans who continued to arrive. They were crowded together in some semi-abandoned houses, in the urban centre of Sokółka, the capital of the district.

Meanwhile, at Różanystok the work was intense. Even the boys of the Salesian school helped making use of all the resources available.

They had been joined by a young Orthodox Russian woman. She had fled her country, mingling with the exiles, because she wanted to become a Catholic. The Sisters had fed and clothed her, and now she was sewing quilts and sheets for the orphans who were to come.⁴⁸



On May 16, Sr. Juzek and Sr. Mazzoli could finally leave for the mission to the orphans. They went to Sokółka, to meet all those suffering little ones. They did not want this transfer to be another source of trauma for them.

The first impression they received was a scene that they could not observe without tears. Those infants and children looked like

⁴⁸ Cf. Grassiano, op. cit., 23.

skeletons. Their clothes were only fit for the rag bag. There was not even a trace of a sheet on their beds. In the depths of their eyes one could read the drama of feeling themselves totally lost.

The house chronicle recorded:

The following day together with the two young women who were accompanying them and a government inspector, the Sisters left for Różanystok with about eighty boys and girls, the majority of whom were barefoot and wearing coats of a thousand colours; some of which reached to their knees and others to their feet. They were not only ragged but emaciated, and some were ill. They were children of the streets, children of the nameless poor. The scene at the station of Sokółka was pitiful. The youngest children cried, others shouted and yet others sobbed. They were made to board a fourth-class carriage hooked on to the train. After a while they calmed down, attracted by the novelty.

It was necessary to take immediate action regarding health care. Sr. Laura already had quite extensive nursing and medical experience. She set up what was needed with the meagre resources available. Her room, which was already a storage place for hundreds of things, became the pharmacy and medical room. It was also a very precious place of welcome as well as wise and liberating comfort.

The Sisters remember the encouraging tone of voice with which Sr. Laura responded, "Come in! Come in!" to anyone who knocked at her door.

There was a little girl of three, covered in ulcers and wounds. She had been abandoned by her mother who suffered from mental illness. She immediately became the favourite. It took time, but Sr. Laura cured her, giving her back the right to life and growth.

A crying bundle was brought by the police, a baby of a few months. It was another little girl and she had been found on the edge of an outlying field. She was covered with scabs and death hung over her. Sr. Laura wrapped her in love and the child

managed to survive. No one ever claimed her and she became a permanent and actively involved member of that large and suffering family.

Sr. Francesca Barucco told of Helena, a child of about two years. She had a bad infection in her eyes. Sr. Laura immediately put her in her own room. She wanted to save her sight, but she did not succeed. Helena, called Hela, became blind. The Sisters saw Sr. Laura crying before the tabernacle.

Hela remained with the Rózanystok community for a long time, until the Sisters were exiled during World War II. Then she was entrusted to other religious who, perhaps because they were Lithuanian nationals, were not persecuted.



The children immediately formed groups. The Polish Sisters became assistants: Sr. Anna Juzek to the older boys, Sr. Anna Ścisłowska to the smaller girls. Janina, the young elementary school teacher, dedicated herself to the older girls and Sr. Francesca Barucco to the younger boys. The candidate, Magdalena, acted as a substitute, while Rozalia helped in hundreds of other ways.

Sr. Maria Mazzoli took on the role of general assistant, in addition to the challenging task she already had as bursar.

Sr. Anna Walenga continued to work fulltime at the SDB School, so an extern cook was employed for the new work.

At night, alas, both Sisters and candidates, stayed up in turns, not only to assist, but for an even greater need. It was necessary to wash the orphans' clothes and dry them around the big stove, since their wardrobe did not contain any extra garments.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The Salesian Bulletin of April 1, 1983 reports an incident of the Salesian Priest, Fr. Tomasz Kopa who, on visiting the orphanage at that time, found a group of children in bed. ““Are they sick?” I asked the Sister who was accompanying me, but she did not reply. ‘What illness do you have?’ I asked

The Sisters, however, had stamina and faith. In faith they turned to God and had complete trust in him, while their stamina made them more demanding with themselves, never finding any sacrifice too great. Sr. Laura, the animator, was responsible for everything. Her spirit of tenacity, respect, and courtesy influenced all those who could and should help and provide.

So it happened that by June 4, 1923, the orphanage was completely transformed. The government inspector looked in amazement at the miracle. The buildings, people, and things were very poor, but one breathed an air of order, cleanliness and serenity. He was also struck by the children's choir that sang the national anthem and the feeling with which one of the little girls read a short welcome address. In two or three weeks something tangible had happened that inspired hope. Before leaving, that gentleman said, "We will enlarge the orphanage. Your 80 children will become 200". He promised to work immediately to obtain the use of the hospital buildings for the Sisters. He suggested the names of officials and ministers and invited Sr. Laura to go to Warsaw soon, where many things could be decided.

At the same time, the news reached the bishop of Vilnius, because news always travels, even before the discovery of cell phones or today's World Wide Web.

Bishop Jerzy Matulewicz arrived in Różanystok on September 8. More than a hundred years had passed since a bishop had visited those places, because they had always been prevented by the Russian domination.

The bishop's Mass was seen as a miracle. On that occasion some of those very poor boys and girls were admitted to First Holy Communion.

They had been prepared, with great enthusiasm and self-sacrifice by Sr. Anna Juzek. They all looked wonderful in their new clothes. The girls were crowned with myrtle leaves.

the children, who, likewise, did not open their mouths. Finally one said, all in one breath, "They are washing our shirts and pants. That is why we are in bed"".

With regard to the others, the word portrait drawn by Grassiano is interesting:

Monsignor saw shoes that were worn but polished, patched but clean jackets and sweaters, little dresses that were mended and faded but adorned or partly hidden by brightly coloured aprons.⁵⁰

The bishop was given hospitality in the hunting lodge of the Czar. It had fallen into disuse but still maintained all its charm. It was made of wood, painted green, had been cleaned and aired, and some parts had been repaired. It was later named, 'the bishop's little villa'.

A month later, he returned to celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation for many of the inhabitants of Rózanystok: fathers and mothers, grandparents, young people and children. The Polish Sisters and SDB organised various kinds of meetings so that all might be prepared to receive the sacrament with awareness, desire, and a love filled with hope.

Meanwhile, in the orphanage, the older girls, because of their previous desperate state of abandonment, had been used to living in a wild and uncontrolled manner. This had left them excessively rebellious, but they gradually felt and understood the friendship of the Sisters. Sr. Laura could not enter into conversation with them, except in a very limited way. However, the language of the heart rarely needs words. It can be seen in the eyes, in gestures, in discreet and respectful interventions, in the absence of condemnation, in kindness that never descended into pity. Thus, these girls calmed down, let go of their defensive hostility and entered into the reassuring atmosphere that guaranteed an expansive freedom for them.

Sr. Bronisława Rudzka was one of those girls. Here is her account:

The transfer of the orphanage of Sokołka to Rózanystok was traumatic for us. We had never before seen religious and fearfully asked ourselves what our lives would be like with them. In the

⁵⁰ Grassiano, op. cit., 27.

beginning we rebelled, but we also felt the goodness of Mother Laura. She did not speak Polish, but she smiled at us and dedicated herself to our good in such a moving way that, in a short time, she had won our hearts and our complete confidence.

We saw the kindness with which she welcomed a baby girl brought to her by a policeman. The infant was covered with ulcers and had been abandoned by her mother.

I remember the great impression that the feast of Corpus Christi made on us. We had never before celebrated in that way. Mother Laura lavished her attention on us so that we might celebrate it with great joy. She obtained new dresses for us and we had a good dinner with dessert. She had us learn beautiful Eucharistic hymns and take part in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament. That experience bound us even more to our new home and to the Sisters. Thus, in a short time, Mother Laura became the person most dear to us, and like daughters we called her *Matula*. It is no wonder that we soon wanted to stay forever with her, consecrating ourselves to God in the FMA Institute.⁵¹

The outing organised that year was written in letters of gold in their memories. It was an outing for those orphans who had never known anything but hard work and unhappiness!

It was an outing that would have been considered very simple, almost banal, by others, a day in the country, from sunrise to sunset. Yet, for them, it remained a milestone.

Walking along the country road, the children passed a group of farm houses with barking dogs and quacking ducks. The people came to their doors and all joined in the celebration of life. Milk fresh from a cow, home-made bread, butter and fruit appeared almost from nowhere, because they felt an irresistible pleasure in contributing to making the cheeks of those children chubbier.

The people in one farmhouse started and word spread to others. All of those farm folk suddenly felt like fathers and mothers to those poor little orphans.

They felt compassion also for the Italian Sisters who still spoke Polish rather like children.

⁵¹ *Summarium* 90-91.

A little later, on June 27, that first school year ended. It had been short but very profitable for everyone.

The superintendent of orphanages was present at the closing celebration and, with satisfaction, approved the choices made for the summer, which were presented to him. The pupils who had some relative ready to receive them would go to their family. The others would be given hospitality for the holidays by the local farmers, who wanted to have them in their homes. A small number remained at the school. Sr. Laura also sent the three Polish Sisters to their families, since they had not seen their dear ones for a long, long time.

The Sisters who remained spent a wonderful holiday together with the candidates. They would gather under a tree, in the field beside the shrine and sew clothes for the orphans. They spoke of them and prayed for them just like real mothers.

“Sisters, let charity toward all be our daily bread, always.”

“Let us do everything in silence. Let only Jesus see it, because only he can recompense us.”



School started again and another Christmas came with spiritual as well as other gifts.

On December 23 a very welcome ‘Infant Jesus’ arrived in the person of a new candidate. She was a newly qualified teacher, by the name of Matylda Sikorska. At that time nobody knew it, but in the future, that is, in 1950, shortly before Mother Laura departed for heaven, she was destined to become the provincial, the Sister responsible for the whole Polish province.

Here is her account of events:

At daybreak on December 23, 1923, I left my family definitively and set out for Różanystok. At Grodno I had to change trains and at that station, I met Sr. Anna Juzek, whom I did not yet know. She had come to Grodno to buy a statue of Infant Jesus, which she had not managed to find. She stated happily, ‘I will bring a live Infant Jesus to Mother’. When we reached the house of the Sisters, we

found it in darkness. The only light was that in front of the Blessed Sacrament.⁵²

Matylda had visited Różanystok for the first time in the summer of 1922. She had read the history of the shrine of Our Lady in the magazine *Poklosie Salezjanskie*. She had found it interesting and decided to make a personal visit to the shrine of the miraculous image.

She narrated:

The parish of Różanystok was then entrusted to just two Salesians. However, during a long conversation with an elderly local woman, I heard that the Sisters were also due to arrive there soon. In fact, a year later, during the holidays of 1923 I met them. It was at the time when the Sisters had moved from the little house they had occupied on their arrival, to the one attached to the former military hospital.⁵³

Matylda was not very interested in the Sisters at that time. She only wanted to see them out of curiosity.

She was welcomed by the youthful and smiling face of Sr. Francesca Barucco.

“I would like to speak to the superior”, and Sr. Laura Meozzi appeared. Her face was not as young as that of Sr. Francesca, but was equally radiant with the light of a friendly welcome.

Matylda was won over by Our Lady of the shrine and also by Sr. Laura Meozzi:

‘But you have not had breakfast.’ And she led me to a room that also served as a linen storeroom. She herself buttered the slices of bread and encouraged me to eat heartily. She acted with such delicacy and motherliness that I received an inexpressible impression.

However, Matylda had to run for the train. Therefore, suddenly and almost without knowing why, she said to Sr. Laura, “I’ll be back soon”. Sr. Laura accompanied her part of the way and

⁵² *Informatio* 100.

⁵³ *Summarium* 57.

continued to follow her with her eyes. “Perhaps she was praying for me.”

Sr. Matylda continued:

After that encounter a mysterious link united me to Mother Laura. A picture of Mary Help of Christians, which she had given me, spoke to my heart. I thought of nothing else except following that Voice.

After Christmas, the young teacher was already a candidate. She immediately became the assistant to the younger orphans:

Chilblains, coughs, scabs... It was a scene of desolation as Mother Laura lanced the festering parts with a small pair of surgical scissors. She bandaged little ailing hands and feet with the delicacy that touched one's heart. She herself prepared the food for the weakest. More than once, I saw her crying before the altar, because the children were hungry.

At that time our food was not just poor, it was miserable, because we lacked everything. The bread was black and there was little of it; the potatoes were counted and the rest rationed, because the government gave us very little.

When I learned about the life of our first Sisters in Mornese and Nizza Monferrato, their humility, charity, obedience, their spirit of sacrifice, I understood that at Rózanystok, guided by Mother Laura, those first Sisters had led the same life. I saw that, despite the conditions, which were anything but easy, they worked with joy, because the love of God and of souls that burned in the heart of Mother Laura had set them on fire with the same love and made them happy.⁵⁴

Good Christians and honest citizens

When the school year 1923-1924 began, the former military hospital was ready to be used as a place of education. The orphans moved in. Classrooms were set up for the school as well as rooms for sewing and embroidery.

⁵⁴ Grassiano, op. cit., 31.

The SDB then gave the Sisters a plot of land to cultivate a kitchen garden. This would have to wait for the right time, because some snowflakes were already floating through the air.

Toward Christmas the snow became so heavy that it was possible to make snowballs, and have some cheerful little battles, and to build snowmen that were as tall as people.

The surname of the engineer who directed the work of restructuring has been recorded.⁵⁵ He was called Tymieniecki and had become a great friend to everyone. For Christmas, he brought presents and helped to find heavy clothing, because playing in the snow is fun, but it is necessary to be dressed for it.

The new year of 1924 began with a ray of hope. The results were beginning to surface.

It was not easy to manage that whole varied world of young children, boys and girls already entering adolescence, and young people who bore the memory of dark and traumatic experiences. However, the number of positive responses was increasing.

Each day pathways were opening for everyone to live in serenity, enlightened by all those human values that Christ had taken to himself, strengthening them with the power of his lived proclamation.

All this showed more than ever the practical power of Don Bosco's Preventive System.

"Good Christians and honest citizens." From the start, Sr. Laura planted in both furrows. They were taught to pray. Religious celebrations were made inviting and involved everyone. She never tired of catechising and above all of evangelising by creating a joyful and witnessing atmosphere in the community. At the same time she wanted those who were Polish to feel Polish; she wanted them to grow in awareness of themselves and their culture.

⁵⁵ Cf. Ibid. 28.

An opportunity soon presented itself in the form of a very special national celebration. May 3 recalled two important events.

- The first was, one could say, the 'birth of Poland'. In 966, at the height of the Middle Ages, during the changing events of the Holy Roman Empire, an army general by the name of Mieszko, succeeded in uniting in a single state all the lands he had conquered, and was recognised as a vassal of the Emperor Otto I of Saxony. On May 3, to strengthen his position both with regard to the empire and the Church, he chose the Catholic-Christian religion for his duchy. Thus, there came about the 'baptism of Poland', a baptism that, among other things, brought the country into the community of European peoples. Two years later the formation of the diocese of Poznań began.

- The second anniversary was that of May 3, 1791, when an historic written Constitution was promulgated in Poland, while the French Revolution was still raging.

This Constitution could boast of being the first to come into existence in Europe and the second in the whole world, coming immediately after that of the United States of America, promulgated in 1789. It established the birth of a constitutional monarchy, with the separation of powers, in a time of enlightened absolutism. It lasted only a very short time, because it was silenced by the second division of Poland that took place in 1792, but nevertheless, it marked a milestone in the history of the country.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Here is how Pope John Paul II spoke on the occasion of the feast of Mary Queen of Poland, on May 3, 1982, "... and thus in our prayer, we also look at both recent and past events of our history. Above all, we look at that event that happened almost 200 years ago: the Constitution of May 3. An enormous event! It is significant that it happened on the vigil of the division of our country. It would therefore seem as if the Constitution remained a dead letter. Yet the experience of history witnesses to the fact that the Constitution shaped the life of the nation, even under foreign domination and a different system. It became the soul of social and national life, and throughout the years and the generations, it prepared our ancestors for the reconstruction of independence".

Later, May 3 took on a Marian significance. On that day, in Poland, they began to celebrate the Virgin Mary, as the undisputed queen of Poland, as they continue to do today.⁵⁷

Even though this did not happen during the lifetime of Sr. Laura Meozzi, it seems fitting to recall here how on May 3, 1966, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński of Poland, made an act of total dedication to Mary at Jasna Góra.⁵⁸

Returning to the topic of good Christians and honest citizens, a very interesting event took place at Różanystok. On May 3, 1924 Sr. Laura desired that all the children should celebrate a great feast. She asked the Polish Sisters to prepare them well to understand the patriotic and religious values of the different celebrations. She wanted them to entrust themselves to the queen of Poland, yes, but that at the same time they might feel in their hearts a pride in belonging to that people with its civilisation and its fundamental values, not least the sense of their national dignity and

⁵⁷ Although hundreds of miraculous events were never recorded, eight volumes exist today in the archives of the shrine. They record, often with great precision, about 1,400 miracles attributed to the intercession of Our Lady of Jasna Góra. On September 8, 1717, this image was crowned Queen of Poland. Every year, the pilgrimage of August 6 is of great importance. It brings thousands of the faithful to undertake, in nine days, the 243 km walk from Warsaw to the hill of Częstochowa.

⁵⁸ The Servant of God Stefan Wyszyński (1901- 1981) was an outstanding witness to Christ in a dark period for the Church in Poland. He fulfilled an essential role in the defence of the freedom of believers during the years when Soviet style Communism reigned supreme, and during the so called, Cold War. For this he was severely persecuted, to the point of undergoing house arrest in a convent from 1948. When, in October 1956, Poland, while remaining Communist, rebelled against the Soviet dictatorship, he resumed his ministry, coming to an agreement with the government on forms of mutual relations in a way that discouraged armed intervention on the part of the Soviet regime. He was judged as being too moderate by some members of the Roman Curia, who forced him to wait for a few days when, in 1957, he arrived in Rome to visit Pope Pius XII.

independence. She was not Polish, but something more. She was a sincerely Christian woman, and therefore open to the reality of Christ, divine and human, who becomes incarnate in each and everyone and who made his own all the human aspirations of every time and place.

Many years later Sr. Matylda Sikorska would still remember, “the pretty little hats and coloured bows” that transformed those, “poor little orphans” into so many, “flowers of the fields”.⁵⁹



In spring of 1924 something happened at Różanystok which no one could have imagined a few months earlier. The orphans discovered how beautiful and enjoyable it was to spend a few days in reflection and prayer, leaving aside many other things. Yes, they made a spiritual retreat. It would not have been possible to do this if hearts embittered by years of neglect and abandonment had not been helped to find peace. Yet, this miracle had happened.

The first to enter the prayerful silence were the pupils of the elementary classes. Then it was the turn of the older ones. It was not only the resident students of the school who took part, but also the day pupils of the locality who had begun to frequent the same school.

Even the older girls, who had been ‘difficult’, had gradually felt the warmth of friendship that the Sisters offered them. They had softened, stopped making it almost a point of honour to be rebellious and disrespectful. They had learned to smile. In fact, when in that same 1924, the turn of the six Sisters of the community came to make their retreat, it was those same girls who helped the postulants, Julia Janus, Rożalia Szczerbowska, and the candidate Matylda Sikorska, to care for the smaller children.

This was what Matylda saw immediately:

⁵⁹ Cf. *Summarium* 59.

Many of those orphans had colds, quite a few had their heads covered with scabs, and others had chilblains on their hands and feet. Mother bandaged those little hands and those poor ulcerated feet with maternal delicacy and tenderness. She frequently went to the kitchen in person to see how the food was being prepared and she herself often cooked for them.



On June 7, 1924, it was no longer only the local bishop who arrived at the station of Białystok, but the Apostolic Nuncio, representing the Pope. He was Bishop Lorenzo Lauri. The various authorities welcomed him and then, in three cars, they accompanied him to Rózanystok.

He was given hospitality in the 'little green house'. There were also a prefect and a colonel, who were given hospitality with the SDB while their wives were welcomed by the Sisters.

Three days of solemn celebrations took place. At a certain point, one small boy, without paying attention to anyone or anything, left his place and went to kiss the Nuncio. A young girl recited a poem to him in Italian.

When the holidays came again, as in the previous year, some children were welcomed by relatives, others by the farming people, and yet others stayed with the Sisters, who, with growing creative ability, organised a series of formative and entertaining activities so that they could continue their human development in a harmonious manner. There were woods all around and life was abundant.

Once again, for the new Sisters there were unforgettable moments of light in the midst of those beautiful, colourful natural surroundings. They would look for a little shady place among the moss and Sr. Laura spoke. "Her simple, warm words led us to sentiments of gratitude to the Creator for so many beautiful living things."

A new living cell

To get from Rózanystok to Vilnius, at that now distant time, it took six or seven hours on the train, always travelling east.

After a long history of ups and downs, on February 20, 1922, the Lithuanian city of Vilnius was annexed to Poland, becoming the capital of the Vilnius region.

In Vilnius there were two social works. They had been founded at the beginning of the century, by a great priest, Napoléon Dyakowski, in the midst of great sacrifice and much work. In 1920, at the age of forty-six, he fell victim to the Soviet revolution. Arrested at the beginning of August, he was subjected to very harsh imprisonment in the extermination camps of Grodno and then, on an unknown date during that same month, he was brutally murdered.

At first, the two works were entrusted to Monsignor Karol Lubianiec, the very busy rector of the seminary. Later, the orphanage for boys passed to the Salesians, while Archbishop Jerzy Matulewicz awaited the Sisters whom he wanted to take care of that of the girls. He had seen what had happened at Rózanystok and he expected a similar miracle to take place in Vilnius.

The full and enthusiastic authorisation from the central leadership in Nizza Monferrato arrived at the beginning of the summer. Then Sr. Laura began to commute between Rózanystok and Vilnius, being responsible for a time, for both communities. In her travels to Vilnius she was accompanied by Sr. Anna Juzek, who was always a first class interpreter.

Regarding the economic maintenance of the new work, Monsignor Lubianiec thought that they should not encounter excessive difficulties. The sewing and knitting workshops would bring in some money, and they would be able to use the agricultural produce from the Polepie farm.

This farm was situated about thirty kilometres to the south from the city of Vilnius, and it had been donated by the same

Monsignor Lubianiec, in his role as president of the Society for Temperance and Work.

He was happy to assign it to the orphans, so that from Vilnius, they might not only enjoy its produce, but also spend some healthy holidays there.



Beautiful! But coming back to the immediate economic problems facing the new work in Vilnius, it must be said, at least at that time, all that was done was not really enough. It was also necessary to depend on humble, constant, and patient knocking on doors of potential benefactors, as well as the very arduous task of requesting assistance from the public administration. Thus, Sr. Laura, in all her coming and going, had to add more journeys to Warsaw. Her asthma accompanied her, but she tried not to give in to it.

They began from the bricks and mortar. The house needed restructuring, adaptation and so forth, and it is clear that once one embarks on this area, any available money soon disappears.

Meanwhile everyone, beginning with the postulants, threw themselves into the work, with generous doses of elbow grease. Providentially, five new postulants had arrived to replace the first three who, in August of 1924, had to leave for Italy, where they would make their novitiate.

The fourth member of that group, Zofia Sowińska, had remained at Różanystok. Sr. Laura had asked her this as a favour, because her outstanding talents made her indispensable, at that time, for teaching in the school and administration, since Sr. Anna Juzek had been transferred to the new house of Vilnius.

The work was inaugurated on September 6, and on that day commuting ended. Sr. Anna Juzek and Sr. Francesca Barucco settled in the big building on Stefanska Street. With them was also

a young woman by the name of Emilia Dzansek. The work was named House of the Sacred Heart.

Between September 15-18, 120 resident girls arrived and the Sisters immediately set about organising various rooms of the house.

Sr. Laura, who continued as community animator, came and went. Her arrival always brought joy and this impressed the girls. The previous director of the elementary school, Miss Celestyna Frydówna, was still there as a teacher and assistant to the older girls.

Sr. Laura's commitment was ever the same, like granite, as she tried to inspire everyone: Sisters, postulants, lay personnel and girls. She treated each one according to her situation and receptivity.

She kept alive the requirements of the charism: to tend toward ever greater union with God in order to become an evangelical vehicle of God's love, grace, and call in life.

She wrote in one of her letters to the Sisters:

*My wish for you is that you may do much good for the girls and you will do so if you remain among them to help them, to watch with a mother's heart, to give them good example, especially of the seriousness of life. A Sister must live with a pure heart, detached from everything and every person. She must live doing good with mortification of the senses and the observation of the Rule. We, like Don Bosco, must use our time for the glory of God.*⁶⁰



When everything seemed to be well established, Sr. Laura left the candidate Zofia Sowińska permanently in Vilnius, since she was now more than prepared to undertake a beneficial Salesian

⁶⁰ This letter was certainly written to the community of Vilnius, however it is undated: op. cit., Lettera 219. Dalcerci, Lina (a cura di), *Ascolta O Figlia: Lettere di Madre Laura Meozzi*, Roma FMA, 1984, 387.

assistance. This choice was noted as follows in the house chronicle:

It is a real comfort for us, since it is so necessary at the beginnings of a new house, to be able to count on a mind and heart capable of directing and helping in the difficulties in which we find ourselves.⁶¹

But who was this candidate Sowinska? She was, and remained, a providential and even a rather exceptional presence. Here is a brief description.

She presented herself at Rózanystok in early November of 1923 as a teacher, even though, in the depths of her heart, she felt the fire of a vocation to religious life. But this was her secret. She wanted to discern her vocation, to weigh that desire which seemed a bit inopportune to her, especially given that she was no longer young. There would always be time to reveal it.

She began to teach the children as well as the Italian Sisters who needed to learn the Polish language well. Sr. Laura saw her exceptional talent immediately. She would be an excellent teacher. She just needed to tone down a little her tendency to always demand the best.

However, Sr. Laura began very delicately and in an inclusive way, to give her lessons in return, teaching her tolerance and amiability.

Zofia was almost thirty-five years old. She came from a well-to-do family in Warsaw and was used to commanding. She had attended various specialisation courses, open as she was to a wide spectrum of cultural interests. She spoke French fluently and had learned Italian, German and Russian in some depth. After her father's death, she had opened and directed a Froebel school.

One day someone gave her a picture of Mary Help of Christians, and so she decided to go and see what was happening in Rózanystok.

⁶¹ *Cronaca della comunità di Vilnius*, 18 settembre 1924.

The life of the Sisters attracted her. However, at the same time, it aroused a certain preoccupation. If there was one thing in the world she feared it was to feel humiliated. The material shortages did not worry her, but submission did.

In this regard, a phrase written by Domenica Grassiano is interesting, “Zofia Sowińska was like a thoroughbred horse”. And so? Here is how the sentence continues, “... gently but firmly Mother Laura knew how to distinguish a nag from a steed”.⁶² Mother Laura had no fear of difficulties. She loved people and helped them to draw out from themselves all the potential that bore the stamp of God, in order to give it to others.

Relaxing times in the fresh air

Meanwhile at Różanystok the five new postulants had entered fully into the apostolic activity. Here is a snapshot of them and their assigned tasks:

- Jadwiga Górka: dressmaking teacher
- Anastasia Trakimowicz: knitting teacher
- Marianna Ckodziutko: assistant of a group of orphans
- Marta Tomasz: sacristan
- Bronisława Kwietnieszka: assistant cook

They were five very young women, but they had already deeply understood the ways of a Salesian vocation. They were ready, “to do everything, suffer everything, learn everything as long as they could become FMA”. This is what has been written in the memories of those who spoke of them.

It was Christmas again, Christmas of 1924, the third that Sr.Laura would spend there, so close to the Baltic latitude.

From one Christmas to another a path had unfolded.

⁶² Grassiano, op. cit., 33.

This time there were celebrations also in the house of Vilnius. It was Monsignor Lubianiec who launched the vigil celebration of the *oplatek*, while Sr. Laura presided at it in Rózanystok.

What is the *oplatek*? It is a light, white unleavened bread, rectangular in shape, with symbols of peace and joy embossed on it. In Poland, at the rising of the first star on December 24, the family gathers, along with relatives and friends. They break the *oplatek* and distribute pieces as a sign of joyful communion and the overcoming of interpersonal difficulties, obviously recalling the liberating mystery of the Eucharist.

Both at Vilnius and at Rózanystok the *oplatek* united everyone: Sisters, friends and orphans. The number of people did not matter, they were a single family.

At Vilnius the candidate Zofia Sowińska managed to prepare a fabulous play. It must be remembered that she had very little time in which to do so, and worked with people who were only getting to know each other. She was a real champion!

There were a number of repeat performances and it was very successful with the people of the area. It even brought in some offerings, which were by no means unwelcome.

It is not known if Sr. Laura went to see the play. Perhaps she did since she was always committed to encouraging and promoting everyone. What is known, however, is that when she went she had difficulty coping because everyone, even the children, wanted to approach her, to tell her their stories, to receive a smile and a caress from her, and to enjoy her genuine motherliness.



Spring came and on April 28, 1925, Sr. Laura left for Italy. She was accompanied by Zofia Sowińska.

But why her, who was not even officially a candidate? Perhaps, according to what was written in the Salesian Bulletin of April 1, 1983, to introduce her in person to those who needed to become acquainted with her. To accept her into the Institute a dispensation was necessary, because Zofia, who was born in 1889,

was already beyond the age limit, which at that time was strictly applied.

Here are the stages of those days in Italy:

- Nizza Monferrato: meeting with mother general and with the three novices from Rózanystok.

- Rome: meeting with Cardinal Cagliero who, finally gave Zofia the postulant's medal. Then the great meeting with Pope Pius XI, who, on May 17, in the Basilica of St. Peter, canonised the great 'little Teresa' of Lisieux. On that occasion, Sr. Laura also met her sister, Sr. Rita.

It was the new Mother General, Mother Luisa Vaschetti who had asked her to undertake that journey. She wanted to know about the Polish situation personally.

The possible opening of an important new foundation was also under discussion. Princess Maria Radziwiłówna intended to donate land in Warsaw. She wanted a work in favour of, "the daughters of the people" to be established there.⁶³

The return journey was filled with hope. Sr. Laura and the new postulant Zofia were accompanied by another Polish Sister, Maria Fegiel who was almost thirty years professed and had always been in Italy. She would go to Vilnius.

They were also promised more personnel. As soon as possible two new Italian missionaries would go to Poland: Sr. Cleofe Brogginini and Sr. Adele Arata.

Sr. Adele Arata, from Liguria, was past forty years of age. She was already giving herself intensely to the works in Italy, and she had been asked to go north, even though she had never presented a missionary request.

She went, but later, despite her strength of character and willpower, she could not overcome the difficulty of the language,

⁶³ Cf. *Cronaca*, 28 aprile 1925. Princess Maria Radziwiłówna, wife of Prince Michał, born in Warsaw in 1860 and died in 1930, was a great supporter of the work of the Polish Church.

or the formidable problem of winter temperatures that even fell to forty degrees below zero. This was diametrically opposed to the very mild maritime climate she had known in the past. Thus after about a year she had to leave that land, to which, although she loved it, without mincing words, she had given the name, Siberia. She returned to Italy and worked hard for another forty years, especially among the young female workers in hostels, leaving memories of a profound Gospel witness.

Instead, Sr. Cleofe Brogginì was young, still in temporary profession. She was born at Buguggiate, in the province of Varese. She had spent the first years of her religious life in the student hostels of Parma and Padua. She had volunteered for the foreign missions and now, here she was in Rózanystok, with her profound intelligence, her availability for Salesian obedience, her welcoming attitude, and her way of acting that showed a certain innate elegance.

It took some time to get permission for her to be a novice formator, because she had not yet reached the age required by Canon Law, but in the end it was all for the best.



There was something new in the summer holidays that year. It was possible to have a pleasant vacation in the Polepie farm. They enjoyed a simple style of life sleeping on rustling sacks of leaves and that proved a unique form of amusement. Then, they could run freely in the woods, drink from a spring, and why not, climb a few trees? When harvest time arrived, they became gleaners.

All that breath of serene freedom contributed toward easing the pain of certain old wounds for about thirty orphans.

There were unforgettable things happening in Rózanystok, too. There was a very important visit from high level scholastic authorities.

They were enchanted. How could everything have changed so much, in such a short time and with so few resources?

The community chronicle documents this educational success emphasising its social effects. As a result of that visit it was decided to send another group of orphans: thirty-two boys and eight girls. The government itself, by means of a contract, would provide for their support and would commit itself immediately to restore another of the buildings that made up the complex.

The new orphans came from the foundling home of the Sisters of St. Vincent and from the institute of the Abbot Boduène,⁶⁴ two institutions that needed to reduce the numbers of those whom they assisted in order to be able to receive those newly repatriated.



On October 6, the Rector Major, Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, arrived. He was the much loved father of the whole Salesian Family of Don Bosco.

There were poems in Italian even at the station. Then they went home to Vilnius. The Sisters house was the nearest to the station. Sr. Laura prepared an Italian and Polish style breakfast. This was followed by a great chorus of youthful voices singing hymns of praise and love for Don Bosco in Italian.

The name and surname of Helena Kwiecień is recorded among those people who read and sang in Italian. This young woman had nearly completed her teacher training and she hoped to be accepted as a candidate soon. Her pronunciation seemed almost Florentine.

Fr. Rinaldi looked on, and his eyes shone with emotion at that sea of heads, most of them blond, an expanse of flushed faces that expressed enthusiasm, joy, and hope. There was a concentration of

⁶⁴ Three different versions of the surname of this abbot have been found. Boduène in the *Informatio*, Boduen (the Polish form, as witnessed by the name of a street in Warsaw), Bodouin (the French form). The name is Gabriel Peter. He was born in France in 1689, and died in Poland in 1768. He belonged to the Congregation of the Missions, founded by St. Vincent de Paul. He arrived in Warsaw in 1717 and worked especially with abandoned children exposed to death and with women unable to or incapable of managing as mothers.

energy and vitality that only needed to be guided toward building a different page of history, in a more beautiful and cleaner world.

Sr. Laura left for Różanystok immediately, to put the final touches to the preparations to welcome Fr. Rinaldi.

The Różanystok celebration was also filled with joy and light. There were musical and poetic presentations, speeches, applause and more besides. Then, at the end, all crowded into the chapel of the boys' school which, though the largest, was barely enough to provide breathing space.

However, the boys and girls were so full of curiosity, that they did not pay much attention to the crowd that was pressing in on them.

Fr. Rinaldi told them:

I have seen the parish church, I have seen the little church of Mary Help of Christians, but of all of them, I like yours the best. The ceiling covered in stars must remind you of heaven. You have your king, Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and your Queen who reigns on the altar. The angels are missing so you must be such, not only in the chapel, but also in the study, and at recreation.⁶⁵



After that visit the new school year was launched. It began with enthusiasm, good will, and dynamic, constructive hope.

The process to obtain juridical approval for a middle school, and craft and technical schools for girls was making good progress. The Sisters had no problems regarding the boys because, after the elementary school they sent them to the SDB.

For all this, and much more besides, the postulant Zofia Sowińska was invaluable. She accompanied Sr. Laura to the offices and always knew how to pull all of the right strings with her words. After Sr. Anna Juzek left for Vilnius, Zofia was always the one who went back and forth to the government offices, even

⁶⁵ *Informatio* 106.

those at the highest level. She was courteous, ladylike, but firm and had very clear ideas.

It was not merely a question of opening schools, but also of establishing the legal status of the orphans, whose family connections were at times untraceable. She usually succeeded and quickly.

...and difficult days of sorrow

Another Christmas came and the new year dawned. Sr. Laura spent this time between her bed and a couch, because she had fallen bruising herself very badly.

On January 12 a destructive monster arrived to throw everything into confusion. It was a red, burning monster called fire. It attacked and devoured the church.

It was night. A sleepless Sr. Laura, found herself almost suffocated by one of her asthma crisis. She invoked Mother Mazzarello and immediately heard an energetic knock on the front door.

It was really necessary to find out what was happening, but she could not get up. She managed to knock against the wall with a candlestick she kept on her night table. Sr. Maria Mazzoli ran to her and, though almost without a voice, Sr. Laura managed to make her understand that she should go to the door and look.

There was nobody outside, but through a window, Sr. Maria saw that the inside of the church was in flames.

There was much to be done. The SDB came running, reinforced by two or three older boys. They had not been called. The rector did not know who awakened him and made him notice the fire. The coadjutor who was with him then climbed into the attic to pour water on the flames, but almost immediately he slipped and fell. He could have fallen into the flames but instead he got up as if nothing had happened.

Finally, after two hours of hard work the fire was under control. It had remained confined to the chapel and there were no

victims. However, there certainly was a lot of damage. Through the half destroyed roof one could see the stars.

In parenthesis, it is worth remembering that not long before Fr. Rinaldi had spoken of the, ‘ceiling of stars’ that should remind them of heaven.

When everyone was able to draw their breath, they began to reflect on the events that had just taken place. Who had knocked so insistently on the front door? Who had said “wake up!” to the rector? Who caught the coadjutor when he slipped?

The response was unanimous. It was Mother Mazzarello.

Besides all this, Sr. Laura had overcome her serious asthma attack. Two hours earlier, she believed she was going to die, and now, here she was in the midst of all the others.

Then, toward the end of January, Sr. Maria Mazzoli slipped on the ice. This time, Mother Mazzarello did not prevent it.

With regard to the months that followed, the chronicle gives the following information:

- April, Easter: the statue of the Sacred Heart was enthroned in the restored chapel.

- July: at Rózanystok, eight girls received conditional baptism. Perhaps they had already been baptised but this could not be proved. Despite all her research, the postulant, Zofia Sowińska, had not succeeded in finding the relevant documents.

- Also in July, toward the end of the month, nine postulants left for the novitiate in Nizza. This time Zofia was also in the group. It would be difficult to substitute her, but Providence would think of that.

- Still during that period, Sr. Laura, no longer accompanied by Zofia, who was already in the novitiate, took her little suitcase and set out. She went to Warsaw to meet the new Apostolic Nuncio, Bishop Francesco Marmaggi SDB, to whom she always referred everything. This time the favour she was asking of him was to lend a hand in a rather intricate situation: the handing over, on the part of the archbishop, of a piece of land that would be used for the

school of Vilnius. The girls needed it because the building in which they were living did not have an adequate playground, a gym or a playing field in which they could exercise freely.

When Sr. Laura and one or other of her interpreter companions went to Warsaw, they usually stayed with the Sisters of St. Elizabeth, with whom they had a very cordial relationship.⁶⁶ That time, however, the nuncio gave them a key to the visitors' room in his own house.

In the midst of all this activity Sr. Laura never for a moment forgot that she was, first and foremost, responsible for the people entrusted to her and that they needed spiritual bread.

The testimonies of that time are significant. One document reported in the *Summarium*, stated:

If it were not for her patient, vigilant and untiring care, the little group of young and inexperienced Sisters and postulants would never have succeeded in forming themselves to the genuine Salesian spirit, or in fulfilling their important duties. If the FMA Institute enjoyed full recognition from the authorities and the people, it is due to the great prudence, delicate, refined tact and heroic spirit of sacrifice of Mother Laura.⁶⁷

These are very weighty words, "If it were not for ... would never have succeeded". It was an almost inevitable cause and effect relationship.

The writer of the article continued, "It was [Mother Laura] who laid the foundations of the Institute in Poland, not only regarding the external structures, but also the spiritual framework".

She recalled Mother Laura as she watched over every work, taking a personal interest in everything and everyone.

There was neither work nor commitment that escaped her maternal care:

⁶⁶ The recently founded Sisters of the Eucharist, which Sr. Laura helped and accompanied spiritually, are also recorded in the *Summarium* 101, as well as the Sisters of the Family of Mary, to whom she always showed reverence and friendship.

⁶⁷ Olczyk Aniela, *Genesi e sviluppo dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, in *Summarium* 536.

In her wise Good Nights and regular conferences, she communicated the richness of her own spirit into the hearts of the Sisters. They were an efficacious means of teaching a simple, robust Salesian asceticism, directed toward God and exemplary in their own environment.

Stories of courageous women

Some individual stories say more than a whole dictionary and more than a thousand magazine articles. Kondratowicz is a very difficult surname to pronounce. Yet it was the surname of four orphans whose father had died of pernicious pneumonia.

He had worked on the railway in Russia, where the family had been deported at the beginning of World War I. He had to work far beyond his strength in transporting goods and soldiers, while his children shivered with the cold and had very little to eat. When hostilities ended, his wife had, with huge effort and sacrifice, managed to obtain their repatriation, after which she also died, with her fifth unborn child.

Thus Janina and Jadwiga Kondratowicz were accepted at Vilnius, by Sr. Laura Meozzi, while the door of the Salesian Institute was opened to their two brothers, whose names are not recorded.

Soon Janina felt the call to religious life in her heart, but what was she to do since she was the eldest and had to be like a mother to her two brothers and her little sister?

Sr. Laura dried her tears. “Do not worry, I’ll think about it. You follow your vocation.”

When Janina arrived in Rózanystok as a postulant, Sr. Laura embraced her, “How tired you are”! She brought her to her own room, gave her water and one of her own towels. Then she called Sr. Cleofe Broggini to help her to get organised.

Toward evening she came back with a book. “It is the life of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus. It will do you good. It will teach you to meditate.”

Almost immediately Janina received the task of becoming like a loving mother for the youngest orphans. She felt the support of her community animator. Whenever she could, as she alternated between the two houses she had to look after, Sr. Laura approached the young woman, as she did for all the others, and her words which were inspiring though brief, encouraged her to go forward.

This is how the formation of new vocations took place in that corner of the world: in the midst of the apostolic work, with an accompaniment that was filled with love, human wisdom, and Gospel spirituality according to the Salesian style.

Her sister Jadwiga, who had a lively and sharp intelligence, was able to study and obtain a high school diploma and then worked in the house of Różanystok. She was employed as a school secretary, alongside Sr. Zofia Sowińska. At a certain point, she, too, became an FMA.

Later, Janina, was able to make use of the natural musical talent she possessed, undertaking a serious study of the piano.

What about their brothers? At a certain point one of them, decided to run away, even though the SDB were very worthy sons of Don Bosco. He came for a moment to Sr. Janina and said, “I am not staying in school any longer. I don’t know where I’ll live, but I’ll manage. I’m a grown-up and I’ll find work”.

Later, when telling her story to Domenica Grassiano, Sr Janina said, that he did not even give her time to respond, “He just slammed the door and left”.

He was an adolescent and was searching for independence and freedom. He wanted to build his life according to his own plans. He was also courageous and was not really rebellious or ungrateful.

It was Mother Laura who began the search. They found him two days later. Above all he was hungry. “They told him, *Mateczka* will think about you. You will not return to the orphanage anymore.”

Mother Laura's proposal was like a dream come true for the boy. *Mateczka* would pay for his studies. She would find a place for him to live independently, and would be close to him as long as was necessary.

In fact, the boy (why did they not give his name?) grew up to be a fine, upright man. In 1980, when Grassiano was able to speak with him, he was a good father of a family.

There is a further detail. Earlier, during the years of World War II, as, "soldier Kondratowicz", he faced serious difficulties and for a long time, nothing was known of him. But Sr. Laura Meozzi used to say to his sisters, "Do not be afraid; I am sure he will return".⁶⁸



Here is another story, this time about a young woman called, Helena Kwiecień. She was the girl who read the greeting to Fr. Rinaldi in perfect Italian when he arrived in Vilnius.

She lived as a paying guest in the Sacred Heart House and attended the nearby state school. She received her diploma in 1929 and taught for three years in the state school of Różanystok while living with the Sisters and teaching the novices.

Then in 1932, as she recounts, the Salesian Sisters opened a private Catholic school in Różanystok, for first to seventh elementary classes. Mother Laura entrusted to her the task of educational director. Helena would continue in that role as a postulant and novice.

Finally! For years she had kept the aspiration to become an FMA in her heart, and saw herself already as a Sister. She undertook a profound apostolate among the lay teachers, always in harmony with Sr. Laura.

She also wanted to live the vow of poverty, and so every month she placed her whole salary in the hands of Sr. Laura, being content to use whatever was available just as the Sisters did.

⁶⁸ Cf. Grassiano, op. cit., 100 sgg.

In 1939 Helena became an FMA and went to direct the private school run by the Sisters at Vilnius. She says, “At that time Mother Laura was living not far away, in Laurów”.

Mother Laura had always been the guiding star for Helena Kwiecień. In the *Summarium* her testimony highlights the fullness with which *Mateczka*⁶⁹ lived her total dedication to God in a unified way through a total dedication to each of the persons entrusted to her.

For these people she wanted to open the paths of joy that comes from an encounter with the Lord together with the full realisation of themselves.

“Sr. Laura conquered hearts. She took an interest in everything and everyone, like a mother. She did everything possible to give the girls a solid culture, and to communicate a genuine spirit of faith to them.” She wanted the orphans, when they were able, to continue their studies, and she trusted in God for the money. She took special care of those who had learning difficulties. The same was true of difficult characters. Always and for everyone, she had a positive eye. She emphasised the good side and also wanted others to focus on it.

“When we heard her say, ‘Come, my child, come’, our heart opened wide.”

Sr. Laura saw herself as a missionary of happiness for everyone, children, young people and Sisters. She also considered it necessary for the children to be beautiful and tidy: a nice knot in the boys’ ties, a flower in the girls’ hair, order, cleanliness, harmony in everything.

“She even sent a Sister to learn the art of hairdressing.”



⁶⁹ Polish speaking people are almost jealous of this word. They consider it difficult to translate; then they resign themselves to offer this version, “a good, authoritative, understanding mother, who is worthy of veneration”.

There was another young Polish woman named Aniela Księżopolska. She had known the SDB from childhood. At about twenty-two years of age, after a spiritual retreat animated by her parish priest, she asked to be accepted into the Institute. For her, the meeting with Mother Laura at Vilnius was like the fulfilment of a dream. "I immediately had the impression that she was reading my heart."

Aniela told Sr. Laura all about herself, her worries, her aspirations, her fears and her hopes.

She remained in the community as a candidate, and her main occupation was to work in the kitchen. For her, that also was a training ground for life. Sr. Laura said to her from the start, "You will come to me every day toward dinner time and bring me a plate of the food you have prepared for the children". She wanted to make sure that everything was good and appealing.

Aniela became an FMA in 1935, returning to the house of Vilnius after her novitiate.

For her, that house was like a beehive.

In a beehive there are no empty spaces or anything insignificant. Everything proceeds in harmony, in an enthusiastic interweaving of tasks and roles. In Vilnius Aniela saw all of this, with however one great difference. While the beehive goes ahead in a mechanical and instinctive way, there everything was moved by love. Everything was deeply desired, all were animated by the educational intervention that influenced hearts, opening them to family-like relationships.

Aniela saw how the older boys and girls participated dynamically in the life of the community, reaching out to the little ones to assist and help them. They prepared surprises for them, invented games, and presented little theatrical scenes. It was all really wonderful.

However, she also saw the failures that frequently wounded the heart of her animator. She saw how Sr. Laura was always capable of pardoning and restoring the light, and then forgetting.

She knew, too, that the thoughts of her *Mateczka* followed her distant Sisters, at the cost of substantial sacrifice, through the letters she wrote to them by candlelight.



Władysława and Bronisława Rudzka were two little orphan sisters. They had been rescued from that horrible place that the Sisters had seen in Sokółka. When they reached Różanystok, one could not have foreseen the possibility of their rehabilitation, but Sr. Laura believed in them.

Before long the two sisters began to relax and feel content.

Władysława, who was twelve years old, said immediately that she wanted to become a Sister, and this was neither a joke nor a preadolescent dream.

Instead, Bronisława, whom everyone called Bronia, said no, she would never want to. She was a bit rebellious, but had a pure and generous heart.

Soon this little pony that disliked any form of bridle began to feel the warm and discreet benevolence of Sr. Laura. “She could not yet speak Polish, but she smiled at us with extraordinary goodness and dedicated herself to our good in such a touching way!”

Therefore, one fine day Bronia, too, said, “Yes, I will also become a Sister”. And she said it with conviction and tenacity.

A few more years would pass before she could fulfil this desire. Meanwhile, she needed to prepare well; not only on the spiritual plain. Bronia perfected her skills in the arts of embroidery and drawing as well as in other areas.

Sr. Laura had a retired woman, who was a capable and exquisite artist, come from Grodno to Różanystok to teach the postulants and girls. All were to make good use of their natural gifts.

Where did they paint? In the sacristy.

Władysława instead belonged to the group led by Sr. Anna Juzek, who taught music and singing.

Everyone to their own taste, as Don Bosco wanted. He never saw his thousands of young people as an undifferentiated mass, but accepted them one by one, like flowers, because God's garden is made up of unique flowers.

For the Polish girls there were also lessons in dressmaking.



Here are some scattered voices:

- A pupil who later became an FMA, Jadwiga Kondratowicz, wrote:

I lived the strong and affectionate presence of Mother Laura in the chapel, in the study... I lived her goings and comings... Personal meetings with her in the corridors or on stairs were very pleasant... Her smile was cordial, her brief, kind words always entered deeply into my heart.

- One who was a young child at the time stated:

I noticed that Mother Laura never passed a child by without approaching and saying a good word, accompanied by a beautiful smile and a small gift. She had defective sight, but she saw everything and everyone. For us she was a true mother and that is just what we called her *Mateczka*.

- Another person named, Marian Delasinski, shared, "If I did not become a thief, a delinquent, I am sure I owe it to the prayers of Mother Laura".

This time it is not a question of ending with 'happily ever after'. Here is an episode that had the odour of sulphur.

It happened when Zofia Sowińska had already returned happily after her religious profession.

A candidate presented herself. After the first trial meetings, Sr. Laura believed that it was better to let her know that she did not have a true vocation, but Sr. Zofia did not see it that way.

Sr. Laura sighed, "All right, let her come; but we will have problems".

She was also called Zofia. She was perfect in everything, so much so that some jokingly called her, ‘St. Zofia’.

When Sr. Laura, who was absent at the time, was able to return, all the postulants gathered around her, but on meeting Zofia’s gaze Sr. Laura drew back.

The following morning, at the end of the Mass, she saw her again and could not avoid a feeling of fear. She said later to the assistant, “You know I had the impression of seeing the devil, both yesterday and even worse this morning”.

Sr. Laura was not a visionary.

In the days that followed some ‘miracles’ took place. The young woman went into ecstasy, with rolling eyes, and some contortions, while making strange prophecies. When she was told that she could not stay, ‘St. Zofia’ spat out endless insults and even called the police.

It became known later that she had been sent by a satanic sect. Didn’t the same thing happen in Mornese?

Shortly after her departure, the Salesian Rector, Fr. Jan Romanowicz received a letter from this girl, in which she asked what she should do with the sacred host that she had kept in a handkerchief.⁷⁰

Sr. Matylda Sikorska declared at the Process that Mother Laura discovered, “the deception immediately through inner enlightenment”.

The intense fervour of a growing harvest

Every day brings a new sunrise.

Pope Pius XI had previously been a visitor for Poland and Lithuania, and later, from 1919 to 1921, Apostolic Nuncio. As pope, on February 9, 1927 he issued an interesting decree, as a result of which the image of Our Lady in the chapel at the Gate of Dawn (*Ostra Brama* in Polish) in Vilnius, would be crowned with

⁷⁰ These testimonies can be found, respectively in *Summarium* 478; *Copia Publica* 2035; *Informatio* 118.

a 'papal crown'. This picture, under the title of Icon of the Mother of the Merciful God, had been painted by an unknown artist 200 years earlier, and had always been considered miraculous. There are about 8,000 *ex-votos* there offered by the faithful.⁷¹

In spring and summer pilgrims came in droves and on July 2, the celebration for the crowning took place. On that occasion the house of Stefanska Street stretched its walls to give hospitality, as best they could, to groups of young people and Sisters. The FMA of the community even gave up their beds.

By the following January there were twenty-two new postulants. Was that not also a grace from Mary?

There was yet another novelty.

The railway was inaugurated at Rózanystok on December 8, 1928. The station was a short distance from the Sisters' house, no more than one kilometre.

On the day of that celebration the minister for transport also visited the orphanage. He was in admiration and so he, too, gave the contribution of his authority for the improvement of the work.

In one of her letters to the general council who were still in Nizza, Sr. Maria Mazzoli wrote that, "*the ruins left by the war,*" were by now, "*totally changed*".⁷²



⁷¹ The following can be found on the internet site: www.divinamiseriordiacammara.it. "Divine Mercy has seen to it that seven years later, in 1935, at the request of the Lord Jesus, along with the Icon of the Mother of the Merciful God at Vilnius, the Icon of the Merciful Jesus should be publically venerated for the first time. After the war, when Vilnius remained under the control of the Soviet Union and the majority of the churches were closed, the chapel of the Gate of Dawn remained open."

⁷² In this letter Sr. Maria Mazzoli also said, 'Our dear superior lives by faith and abandons herself in the arms of Divine Providence like a child in her mother's arms. This year we have 186 resident students between orphan boys and girls. We have received permission from the government authorities to have a legally recognised elementary school here in the house, which goes as far as seventh grade. The older girls have a course in dressmaking, given by a postulant who has completed the courses that qualify her to open a school', in Grassiano, op.cit., 61.

The house chronicle contains a wealth of information.

There was an historic visit to Vilnius. The new Bishop, Kazimier Mikołaj Michalkiewicz, came for the first time. He came to see and to bless persons and places. Among these was the site for the new playground. It had been difficult to obtain, but it was theirs at last and was more providential than ever.

It seemed almost impossible, and yet it was true. On that occasion the girls sang in Latin, in three voices, the antiphon, *Ecce sacerdos magnus*. The bishop could not believe his ears.

Shortly afterwards those little girls became enthusiastic about their knowledge of Latin and sang the Christmas novena in accordance with all the canons of the liturgy of the time.

It was the first time this was done in that part of Poland.

Also in those days, there were new apostolic dreams. Mother Laura went to visit the property of Polepie calmly, taking her time. She studied well the structure of the old farmhouse and other buildings that surrounded and completed it.

They were old Russian *izbas* [traditional log houses], once inhabited by people who worked on the farm. They were built of very solid wood that did not allow either the wind or the rain to penetrate, and had a small yard beside the garden or the hay barn. They were rustic but certainly not to be looked down on. However, it would be necessary to modify them in many ways.

In the days that followed, as soon as it became possible for her, she undertook another journey 'into the future'. In almost the opposite direction from Polepie, about twenty-five kilometres to the northeast from the city of Vilnius, there was another property that Monsignor Karol Lubianiec also wanted to give to the Institute. It was the Sakiszki Wood, a large and beautiful area, but one in which there were no buildings. Mother Laura visited every part of it and there she began to visualise a new house for the salvation of the neediest orphans.

There at Sakiszki, not far from where the river Wilia flowed, there was also a beautiful little lake. Grassiano describes it as

altogether picturesque, “that brought Little Red Riding Hood to mind”, with its flowers, wild fruit, and the silent rambling of the wolf. “There actually were wolves.”

Polepie and Sakiski offered apostolic possibilities, but they also involved difficult building projects. A good quantity of timber could be counted on, but a great deal of money was needed and Monsignor Lubianiec did not have it. Sr. Laura had even less!

Meanwhile, from Warsaw the government authorities were pressing the Sisters to accept more orphans. Therefore, it was up to them to loosen the purse strings. Sr. Zofia Sowińska, now an FMA, started to work on it immediately.

Novitiate: the field of the future

Even though in a sense it had been obligatory to send the novices to Nizza Monferrato, it had also proved to be a good choice. There they were at the heart of the Institute, very close to Mornese, not only geographically, but also and especially in a spiritual and formative sense. The waters of the source reached Nizza fresh, or rather, it sprang up almost naturally there. Among other things, the novices learned Italian, which enabled them to draw from the charismatic sources of the Institute.

However, distance brought its consequences. It was difficult, time consuming and costly to obtain Government permission to leave and re-enter the country. Besides, the novices, although generous, were still beginners. It was stressful to suddenly find themselves in an environment totally different from their own, and to have to begin immediately to follow the precious lessons given in Italian by the novice formator.

It was, therefore, desirable to think of another solution. The novitiate was too important a time to be left, even in part, to chance.

At Rózanystok there was a house that merited some thought. It was quite large, but still totally abandoned to the deterioration caused by World War I. It needed energetic restoration work that called for an equally energetic flow of money. There was also

another problem. To implement this project it would be necessary for the SDB school to hand over to the Sisters a building that they had been using. In order to do this it would be necessary for them to restore an unused building. Naturally, none of this would be easy. It would require many permissions and much money. Substantial help would also be required from both Congregations, besides that of the local church authorities.

With regard to the FMA leadership, Sr. Laura had been able to explain everything in person when from August 31 to September 12, 1928, she had the good fortune to be with them at Nizza Monferrato on the occasion of General Chapter IX.

When she returned to Poland, she immediately took action on the other matters. With the precious assistance of Sr. Zofia Sowińska she left for Poznań, quite a distance away to the southeast, to begin from the very top. The house chronicle notes that this journey took place on May 2, 1929.⁷³ The Cardinal of Poland, Augustus Hlond, Salesian, was in Poznań.⁷⁴ He welcomed her and agreed with the proposal she placed before him regarding the opening of an FMA novitiate and the associated problem of the buildings. Thus, the first step had been taken.

At Pentecost it was possible to take another. Providentially, as has already been stated, the new diocesan Bishop, Kazimierz Mikołaj Michalkiewicz, arrived at Różanystok, to confer the sacrament of Confirmation on the orphans. He took to heart the complex problems of the local situation.

Meanwhile, they were also dealing with both councils of the FMA and SDB in Turin.

Thus, they reached the point of signing the documents that permitted the SDB provincial to donate the desired building. *“The Rev. Major Superiors of Turin being aware and giving their*

⁷³ Between 1924-1929 thirty-one Polish Sisters made their novitiate in Italy. *Copia Publica* 1737.

⁷⁴ Servant of God, Cardinal Augustus Hlond, Salesian, July 5, 1881-October 22, 1948.

consent”⁷⁵ as it was put in a letter from the FMA general council, dated June 18. The new institution was named Don Bosco Novitiate.

Sr. Laura went immediately to the Rector of Rózanystok, Fr. Tadeusz Kurpisz, to express her joyful gratitude. He promised that the transfer of the school for the orphaned boys to the appropriate building would take place as soon as possible. This would leave free the area destined for the novices. The community chronicle for that day notes, “Work on repairing the building began immediately”.

They hoped to finish soon, so that the Polish novitiate might begin on August 5. Instead, it was not possible because there were a lot of renovations to be done. It was September before the seven second year novices could return from Nizza, and they had to organise themselves as best they could in what was called the ‘wooden house’ or the ‘little green villa’. However, the novitiate did begin.

There were four other novices, also of the second year, in Nizza, but they did not return to Poland, because they had asked to be sent to the missions.

In the years that followed, some novices, chosen from among those best prepared, continued to be sent to Nizza, so that they might maintain the very precious charismatic bridge with the heart of the Institute.



On October 2 the spiritual retreat began for those who would be first year novices. This was followed by their entrance into the novitiate.

From Rózanystok Sr. Laura wrote to the Sisters of Vilnius:

Tomorrow evening the function so much desired by all, will take place. A new era is beginning for us Daughters of Mary Help of

⁷⁵ Letter, cited in the house chronicle of Rózanystok, June 1929.

*Christians. Let us place ourselves under the protection of Our Lady and of Don Bosco. Imitating their virtues, we will work miracles. Courage, kindness, patience and a perpetual smile and few words, always delicate; and many deeds and examples of great virtue. May Jesus bless you all.*⁷⁶

The reception of the novices was a great celebration. Their great friend, Cardinal Augustus Hlond came from Grodno. The scholastic authorities and some priests from Sokolka also came, as well as four important journalists.

The novices, following the custom then in use, entered the chapel dressed as brides, all in white, with tulle veils. After the ritual dialogue, they left to return dressed in black. They radiated joy, readiness for renunciation and sacrifice, a festive spirit and commitment to a life of austerity, without individualistic demands.

Cardinal Hlond then spoke, reminding the novices that their testing ground would be fidelity to the Lord Jesus in the, “ordinariness of everyday”. The celebration must remain always in their heart, minute by minute. Faith founded on the certainty that the love of God is always victorious, in us and in the world around us, whatever the circumstances of the moment may be.

The first novice formator was Sr. Cleofe Broggini. She was young, only twenty-nine years old, and had been born in the beautiful region of Varese, arriving in Poland in 1925.⁷⁷

Her former novices remember her as a person who possessed, “an intense and luminous expression, a cordial smile, and was considerate and refined in manner”.⁷⁸

Her tenacity helped her to overcome language difficulties quickly, even though she always maintained an appealing cadence that was totally Italian. She also made some mistakes, such as

⁷⁶ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 197.

⁷⁷ During World War II Sr. Cleofe was expelled from Poland. She returned in 1946, but her health was already undermined by tuberculosis. She died in Turin in 1948.

⁷⁸ *Facciamo memoria* 1948.

using an insulting word that was very similar, in written form, to another word with a totally different meaning, but one that needed to be pronounced with an accent she had not yet acquired.

The Sisters admired her simplicity of manner, the humility with which she tranquilly acknowledged her mistakes and eventual reminders. In the beginning, the errors she made were due to the notable difference between the way of life that was then common among Poles and Italians.

She offered a powerful witness to her novices. It has been written about her:

She was obviously animated by a profound and fervent orientation toward the Lord Jesus. She was available for any kind of work, ready for sacrifice, and bore with the freezing climate of the Baltic region. Her constant smile expressed her joy in serving the Lord there where he wanted her, among the persons he had entrusted to her.

The following is one among various memories. The winter of 1929 was particularly severe. The temperature went down to forty degrees below zero. Yet, Sr. Cleofe, born under very different skies, went to a certain deep well to draw water because the pipes which normally carried it to the house were frozen.

The novices entrusted themselves to her with confidence, because they saw her as good and genuine:

...lively, unpredictable at times, energetic and enterprising, firm in her demands and at the same time gentle with everyone.

She was a person of great intelligence and unique foresight, united to a great psychological intuition. Nothing escaped her; she was demanding but also very prudent and capable of recognising the real possibilities of each individual.

Sr. Władysława Rudzka, one of the two little orphan sisters that readers have already encountered, was assigned as the main collaborator of this young and very committed formator.

A strong, growing presence

The period between 1922–1929 was a relatively short time span chronologically, but psychologically it was longer than a century.

Geographically, Różanystok is an almost insignificant place, but historically it represented a place of indescribable heroism.

By now there were buildings, people, works, and hopes. The Różanystok community was already well on its feet, ready to journey further in order to advance toward ever broader horizons of Christian service to a people who had suffered.

On December 7, 1929, Sr. Laura ceased commuting, left Różanystok and transferred to Vilnius. The two houses were, by now, making steady progress. Both were almost overflowing with girls, not just orphans but also students of different ages. There was already a private elementary school up and running, as well as the boarding facility and the day and evening technical school. New vocations continued to knock on the door.

The leadership of the house of Różanystok was entrusted to Sr. Maria Mazzoli, the long time friend of Sr. Laura, while at Vilnius, alongside Sr. Laura, was Sr. Zofia Sowińska as her strong helper. As assistant and formator, she was responsible for accompanying a new group of postulants.

However, that was not her only task, because this Sister, who was so solid and transparent, sensitive and practical, profoundly Salesian and profoundly Polish, had also been entrusted by obedience with a variety of tasks. She undertook the direction of the school, general assistance of the pupils, as well as all kinds of financial, civic, and ecclesial affairs.



Thus, Sr. Laura, the community animator, could also act as provincial, though not publicly named as such. She travelled, visited places in which the Institute would be able to later expand, responded to invitations, and established new contacts. By now there were four houses, the two at Różanystok, one at Vilnius and the fourth opened in September 1929, at Myslowice, in Upper

Silesia. The latter was founded at the request of the bishop and the mayor, who were both anxious about the educational and social needs of the young children of the coal and zinc miners.

In November a long train journey brought Sr. Laura to the regions of the south. She visited Myslowice, where she had sent Sr. Anna Juzek and the two young Sisters, Sr. Matylda Sikorska and Sr. Marta Tomasz. She also saw Oświęcim, home to the SDB who had welcomed her and her Sisters on their first arrival in Poland.

Oświęcim! A name that, during World War II, was translated by the Nazi criminals as Auschwitz! There, under 'showers' of poisonous gas huge numbers of innocent men, women and children died for the sole crime of not fitting into the racial schemes presented by Adolf Hitler and his deadly followers as the Final Solution.

Sr. Laura travelled, forgetting everything, even her asthma, her joint pain, and her worries. She was carried forward in her travels by her lively desire to collaborate in bringing the saving grace of the God's reign to every part of the world.

She travelled, but she remained present to her Sisters.

This is witnessed to by the words and letters that those Sisters preserved like a sacred gift. The following is one example, addressed to Sr. Zofia Sowińska during that autumn of so much travel:

Tomorrow, Sunday, I will go to Oświęcim to leave in the evening for Warsaw and be in Różanystok by Tuesday morning. How long I will stay there I do not know. I only know that I want to go back as soon as possible and work as hard as I can with you to make our house into a really flourishing garden.

We are approaching the novena of the Immaculate. Try to prepare the girls well. Oh, if we only had the chapel!

We will work on the chapel together and try to have it ready for the feast of Our Lady.

I will bring you so much chocolate that it will be enough for a month. Won't you prepare a smiling face for me that will cheer my heart? Courage, Sr. Sofia (Let it be said here that when Mother

Laura wrote to Sr. Zofia, she called her Sofia, in Italian. The author instead prefers always to use her name and surname to distinguish this Sister from other Zofias), *Let us work for our sanctification, let us work as hard as we possibly can, so that our days may be blessed.*⁷⁹

The above was written on October 12, 1929. However, it seems worth presenting some other examples here, without worrying too much about the chronological order.

The following is a letter from earlier times. It belongs to 1926, but it is valid for all time. It is one of her many letters in which she reveals her practical wisdom. She did not spiritualise. Her teaching was not something unrealistic or fleeting. It was down-to-earth like a mother who always had her eyes and heart turned toward her children.

This letter was also addressed to Sr. Zofia Sowińska, but it was for all the Polish novices then in Nizza Monferrato. Sr. Zofia was their interpreter. She was able to read even when *Mateczka* wrote in Italian!

I do not know who told me that some of you are not sleeping much at night. Use a few drops of valerian.

Yes, the difference of air has a big effect on everyone. It is clear to see, because Sr. Marta and Sr. Julia [who had returned to Poland] are completely cured. You should see Sr. Marta! She has an enviably full, rosy face. Take courage, and tell the others to do the same. You will come back to your native air and will flourish again. Meanwhile, take advantage of every opportunity to become good, really good, totally detached from your own will, humble not only in appearance, but truly in your heart, happy only to prove your love for God through daily sacrifices. Love each other and be very kind and delicate. Never use rough treatment, never rudeness. The spouse of Jesus must be a flower of kindness.

You, Sr. Sofia, have great trust in the Lord and in his infinite mercy. Abandon yourself to him with great filial confidence, and love him, love him without measure. Offer him all the little trials that he asks

⁷⁹ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 19 (12 ottobre 1929).

of you every day, at every moment. Try to have your hands always full of flowers and scatter them generously on the thorns you meet.

She also wrote the following to Sr. Zofia Sowińska, toward the end of her novitiate, at a time in which Sr. Zofia was overtaken by a fear made worse by physical weakness:

I would like to write a long letter to you, to comment on your own, but...

Oh yes, if I were speaking to you I would say many things that would strengthen you for the future, give you courage, set you on a path along which you would be able to reach that happiness that is given to religious of good will. For now be courageous and strong.

Go ahead, work for the good Jesus and prepare to work much for souls. Remember that they cost the Blood of Christ. For the present content yourself with offering your tiredness and sacrifices; later you will offer your work directly. Remember that you are a spouse of Jesus Crucified, to whom you must continue to give proof of your love. Then, if I am not mistaken, I seem to read a bit of anxiety regarding the future in your letter, like a secret fear, why?

You will work alongside me, so be at peace. We will work for the good of our dear Poland. So my dear, be courageous and go ahead. Be generous as you have always been. God sees and takes everything into account, and one day, not too far away, the tears will be changed into splendid pearls.⁸⁰



Here, instead, is a letter addressed to Sr. Anna Juzek, who during Lent of 1927 was vicar in Vilnius, but who actually often had to substitute Sr. Laura who, although community animator, had to constantly move here and there. The letter arrived from Różanystok and, naturally, it was for everyone:

In this time of penance and silence...

Silence that is attentive to the voice of Jesus in order to do what he wants of us.

⁸⁰ Op.cit., lettera 14 e lettera 16 (settembre 1928).

Silence of humility: that of Jesus before the judges. The Eternal Word is silent.

Silence of intimacy: like John we rest on the heart of Jesus and listen to his voice.

Silence of penitent love, which seeks to repay Jesus for all the offences against him, with a thousand generous acts of thoughtfulness, overcoming our character and the demands of human nature.

Silence of love with Mary who was silent on Calvary.

Let us nail our hearts to the cross with Jesus, suffering with him and agonising for him.

These were challenging words, but she lived them.⁸¹

This was also written in 1927, and was directly addressed to the whole community of Vilnius:

The prayer that I raise to God every day is that you may love him more, always serve him more faithfully and make him known and loved by whoever does not yet know him.

Let us remember that all is vanity, except to love God and serve him faithfully. We must be like burning lamps to light the path to the Lord for souls, to lead to him those for whose redemption he shed his blood.

We must be of one heart and one soul, bound by links of charity, to help each other, understand each other's defects and our limitations. Let us sympathise with each other generously, without making our own weaknesses and those of others known to the whole world. Faced with any trial, big or small that God sends us, let us behave with a strong, serene and generous virtue, which leads us to holiness, to the perfect fulfilment of our duties.

Do you feel how beautiful religious life is when spent in sacrifice and love?

Be courageous and always go forward with holy cheerfulness, in a constant exchange of acts of kindness and caring, in continuous acts of charity. Became saints, the kind of saints like Don Bosco and our Mother Mazzarello were.⁸²



⁸¹ Op.cit., lettera 1 (febbraio 1927)

⁸² Op.cit., 196. Only the year is given.

Though her letters are many and all of them inspirational, it is necessary to leave them aside for the moment. If the reader wishes, they can be found in the book already cited on many occasions in the footnotes.

However, before going on to other activities of Mother Laura and her Sisters, it is worth spending a few moments at Vilnius, looking at what one might call an external aspect of the life and activity of this missionary of the Gospel, that is, the help she gave with such largeness of heart to Sisters of other religious families.

One of these institutes was the Servants of the Eucharistic Jesus (*Zgromadzenie Sióstr Służebnic Jezusa w Eucharystii*). It had been founded in 1923 by Bishop Jerzy Matulewicz⁸³ to assist the poor of the diocese. It was experiencing many difficulties both for political reasons and because the bishop had only been able to look after them for four years, before being called to his eternal reward at the beginning of January 1927.

The following is the testimony of Sr. Josefa Zuk, one of the first Servants of the Eucharistic Jesus:

In the years between 1927–1937, when our institute was journeying through very precarious events, we asked Mother Laura to accept some of our Sisters into the sewing school. Mother Laura took great interest in us, helping us out of the kindness of her great heart and her motherly attitude to everyone. We were able to take advantage not only of the sewing school, from which the first of our Sisters, Sr. Apollonia Pietkum, graduated. She had received everything *gratis*, including board and lodging, but also spiritually and materially on many other occasions. The house of the Salesian Sisters was like that of our family. Mother Laura's words always centred on the love of God and neighbour and on the invitation to the faithful and ardent service of Christ in religious life.

⁸³ This bishop, who was born in Lithuania, was actually called Jurgis Matulaitis. However, having moved to Poland early in life he was known by the name of Jerzy Matulewicz. He belonged to the Congregation of Marian Clerics and was also their superior general. He became bishop of Vilnius, in 1918, and founded the above mentioned women's congregation. In 1987 Pope John Paul II declared him Blessed.

Another younger Sister, who is recorded only by her surname, Marcilonek stated:

In 1939 I was attending the course for kindergarten school teachers and summer camp directors. With other Sisters of ours, I was living with the Salesian Sisters where Mother Laura was the superior. I remember her eyes that were deep and full of kindness. One could feel that she was completely immersed in God and filled with friendliness and love of neighbour. She had arranged that we should have board and lodging free of charge. We felt immensely indebted and surprised.

People close to Mother Laura say that all the religious of the world were, 'her community'. When she met any one of them it was a celebration for her.

The following words of Domenica Grassiano are significant: Throughout Mother Meozzi's life love of neighbour was never a habit but always new, a discovery. Her life was one unending season of love. For this reason, to the very end she was always capable of shedding tears like those of a child and of entering into harmony with pain.

A thousand roofs... a single home

The first foundations, Rózanystok and Vilnius, have already been described, as well as the novitiate, also in Vilnius.

The foundation at Mysłowice has also been mentioned but more details are required.

Its history began with a telegram, which had been sent in complete agreement, by two significant persons, the local mayor and Bishop Arkadiusz Lisiecki of the diocese of Katowice.

They wanted the Sisters and they wanted them immediately. This foundation had already been discussed quite some time previously, but the project seemed to vanish into thin air.

Everything changed with the arrival of a short but sensational telegram, "Leave immediately. House ready".

Sr. Laura remained with her mouth open. How could she manage to obtain the authorisation of the general council on the spur of the moment?

She consulted the SDB provincial and, at any rate, started to get ready. Permission finally arrived. The chosen Sisters, who have been previously named, were very prompt in obeying. Thus, Sr. Anna Juzek took on the role of community animator, Sr. Matylda Sikorska took charge of the kindergarten and Sr. Marta Tomasz⁸⁴ was entrusted with the courses in dressmaking and sewing, and the oratory for the children of the miners.

From mid-September to November the three pioneers worked as hard as possible to get everything started. Then, with great joy, they received the first visit from Sr. Laura.

These Sisters of hers had gone so far away! But they were really good at their activities, courageous in facing the difficulties they had to deal with every day, and completely dedicated to being in harmony with God's loving will.

Another geographical name then began to surface: Łódź, which was also far away, to the north.

It was another bishop who was knocking at the door. His name was Vincentius Tymieniecki. He had asked and asked, like the man in the Gospel parable who in the heart of the night, went to ask for bread from a friend. A positive response was not forthcoming because a building could not be found that was suitable for youth work. At last they had found one.

The decisive invitation came from the bishop on March 19, 1930.

One hundred days later, on July 2, to be precise, the Sisters arrived in Łódź. They were Sr. Maria Giebel, animator, and three other young Sisters, Sr. Helen Hermanowicz, Sr. Maria Tomaszówna and Sr. Joanna Ziarkowna. Here, too, they would

⁸⁴ Born in 1904, she made her profession at Nizza Monferrato in 1927 and died at Sokołów Podlaski in 1953.

work with children and young women in a kindergarten, a day and evening technical school of sewing and dressmaking, and a festive oratory.

Mother Laura arrived there on October 7 and the house chronicle notes it with joy. The opening of the school year took place as well as the blessing of the chapel.

Then there was Sokołów Podlaski. This marked a new and not insignificant geographic direction.

Sokołów Podlaski is a beautiful city, surrounded by the green of vast woodland with mixed vegetation, in the valley of the river Burg. The region where it is situated is considered to be one of the lungs of Poland. There are also unique species of fauna there. Today it is the destination of many tourists who admire both its buildings and the natural beauty of its surroundings.⁸⁵

Here, too, the Sisters had been asked to come since 1929. Instead they arrived at the end of 1930. The official opening of the house is recorded as January 7, 1931.

Sr. Laura accompanied the Sisters. Again, there were three of them: Sr. Maria Figiel animator, Sr. Anna Ścisłowska and Sr. Julia Janus.

Their task was very demanding from the apostolic point of view. They would supervise in a friendly way, with competence and kindness, the many girls who worked in the kitchen, laundry, and linen room of the imposing educational work of the SDB.

Sr. Laura inspected the buildings reserved for the Sisters and ensured their suitability. She kindly asked if a sewing room for the day pupils as well and a little place for the oratory and formative encounters could be provided.

One reads in the house chronicle, “The Salesians were very fraternal and happy, attentive and cordial. The rector, after

⁸⁵ In the Park of the Burg one can admire, among other things, 795 unique trees that are under strict protection and vigilance.

expressing his gratitude, said, ‘Our three Sisters will be three angels who will protect our house’”.

By now there were five Polish communities entrusted to FMA plus one. In order of foundation they were: Różanystok, Vilnius, Myslowice, Łódź, and Sokołów Podlaski. The ‘plus one’ was the novitiate.

In harmony with the Providence of the Father and under the motherly eye of Mary, the animator of Vilnius, Sr. Laura Meozzi, watched over all these areas, works, and people.

Did this situation, which piled so many burdens on one person’s shoulders, not weigh her down?

Yes, it did, but this did not cause Sr. Laura to diminish her apostolic zeal, which was without reserve or personal limits. One can easily visualise how preoccupying her work, her commitments, her thoughts were at times. It may not be as easy to imagine how she tended toward God, her confidence in the providential love of the Father, the strength of her capacity for giving.

Why did Sr. Laura continue to live in Vilnius? Why not in Różanystok, which had been the first foothold of the Institute there in the northern regions?

There may be more than one reason, but events had led to Vilnius experiencing great apostolic development. Statistics from 1930 offer the following data:

- fourteen Sisters
- twenty-four postulants
- six lay teachers
- one hundred and thirty orphans
- thirty-four boarders
- ninety pupils in the technical school
- seventy girls attending the dressmaking classes.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Chronicle of Vilnius, 1930, annual statistics, AGFMA. In that same year the statistics of Różanystok report the following data: 200 orphans; 285 pupils in the

Sr. Laura was attentive to everything. Each individual person was her friend; each was an inestimable treasure for whom she would even have given her life.

One of them wrote the following words, which are certainly no mere empty praise:

The young and inexperienced Sisters who were then starting so many educational works, and the group of postulants who had no preparation whatsoever, would not have succeeded in carrying out their important duties, if it had not been for the patient, attentive, untiring vigilance of Mother Laura.⁸⁷

Hard-working hands and a quick intelligence were not sufficient. An inner framework was needed that was well-rooted in a living history, a history that had as its starting point the epic times of Valdocco and Mornese. This epic nature, in all its prophetic and sacrificial fullness, was really needed and it was deeply rooted in Sr. Laura.

What follows is a particularly interesting aspect of this whole situation. Sr. Laura was working in a country that was not her own, and in a culture not her own. Yet all the ecclesial, civic and scholastic authorities declared themselves fully satisfied whenever they visited the FMA apostolic works.

But was it really true that the land and culture of Poland were not her own? Could she not say with St. Paul, “I have made myself all things to all people: Greek with the Greeks and a Jew with the Jews”?



In May 1930 another event took place that gave new hope. The Bursar General, Fr. Fedele Giraudi, arrived from Italy. He visited the SDB houses in Poland, but he did not forget the Sisters.

state school, including the resident orphans, 25 pupils enrolled in the technical course; 100 children attending the summer oratory; 22 novices.

⁸⁷ Jadwiga Dudziak, *Copia Publica* 452.

The house chronicle of Róžanystok tells of great enthusiasm. The venerated leader, “visited the whole house, from cellar to attic”. He formed a, “positive and excellent impression” of everything, and he expressed his own joy and that of all he listened to, “your superior works miracles. She is a genuine daughter of Don Bosco”.

In a long letter, written by Mother Laura to the Sisters of Vilnius on that occasion, she wrote:

I spoke to Rev. Fr. Giraudi for at least two hours.

The novices sang, Lodate Maria, O Lingue Fedeli, in Italian and he cried like a baby, seeing that Our Lady and Don Bosco are loved and praised everywhere.

He was pleased with the great cleanliness and order he found. Everything was a jewel: the little ones were clean, and the older girls were orderly. Therefore I recommend the same for you, too. Animate the girls, both residents and day pupils; prepare them as if for a great reception. Speak to them of the superiors and much about Don Bosco. Tell them that if they have faith, Don Bosco will give them many beautiful graces.

Have the hall well-prepared, rent some plants. Have the stage well-decorated, and in the centre let the picture of Don Bosco be prominent.⁸⁸

The letter goes on to point out minutely the various tasks assigned to different people:

Prepare yourselves, my dear Sisters, to receive this superior as you would receive Don Bosco himself, and he will bless us from heaven. It is clear that, arriving at ten and choosing to visit the house after the reception, he will still be there at dinner time. Invite him to dinner and let it be an Italian dinner [and she indicates the menu in detail]. Also invite the two rectors and may a holy, friendly cheerfulness animate you all. My dear Sisters, the house of Vilnius must be first in its good spirit, in order, in cleanliness, in everything.

⁸⁸ Róžanystok, 8 giugno, 1930; Dalcerci, op,cit., lettera 201.

In this letter, regarding the graces that could be obtained, Mother Laura recalls a miracle, the instant cure of a paralysed woman, which took place at Grodno, on the occasion of the beatification of Don Bosco.

Two more pages of advice and suggestions follow: a weighing scale to be removed, an electric light to be kept on, “the dogs well-chained [...] the laundry, the boiler room and the one near the stage should all be like jewels” and so on:

Speak Italian, because he suffers when he cannot understand.

I would like to be with you, but this is not possible for me. However, I am there in spirit. [...] May Jesus unite you in his love and in his divine charity. Love one another, help each other as true sisters, give each other good example, never take offense but use great delicacy and give good example to the postulants.

Regarding the postulants, here is another gem from a caring mother's heart:

They should wear their good clothes and have their shoes well-polished. Their hair should be well-combed. How beautiful it would be if, while Fr. Giraudi is at breakfast and dinner, the postulants could sing in Italian as the novices did here!

Go ahead, do yourselves proud!

All that concern, which included some anxiety, came from the fact that Mother Laura was also about to depart. Mother General, Mother Luisa Vaschetti, who, among other things, was celebrating her name day, was waiting for her in Italy. On that occasion, together with her travel companion, Sr. Cleofe Broggini, she would be able to take part in the spiritual retreat.

In Italy, she hoped to be able to undertake some short journeys here and there, with the aim of finding help and support for her orphans and future works. Instead, she had to return almost immediately, because a telegram brought her alarming news: Sr. Maria Mazzoli was gravely ill.

Mother Laura returned, but Sr. Mazzoli, thank God, did not die. In fact, after a few weeks, she was able to regain her normal strength.

Life as an unrepeatable story

Before dealing with the departure of Sr. Laura from Vilnius, it might be interesting to present some other people.

A young woman, Miss Jadwiga Dudziak arrived. In 1932 she presented herself to Sr. Laura and said that she would like to get to know something about the life of the Sisters. She had heard about their presence in Poland through the Salesian Bulletin. She was qualified in classical studies and was ready to help in the school.

Their conversation took place through an interpreter, because Sr. Laura was still very uncertain in her use of Polish. However, Jadwiga immediately felt that this foreign Sister must be a great woman. Later, in telling her story, she would use a frequently repeated term that needs to be taken with care, "To me she seemed to be a saint".

Then a rather unusual life started for Jadwiga. There was no shortage of work for her. She helped Sr. Zofia Sowińska in the secretariat and also worked in the classroom. The food was anything but abundant and far from refined. The days passed, marked by a certain physical harshness. However, despite everything her heart was opening up to joy.

Since by this time confidence in the Sisters and their educational methods had spread in the area, a certain number of families sent their adolescent daughters to Vilnius as resident students, so that they could attend the various schools. Jadwiga soon became the assistant and friend of these pupils. It was not easy, but there was always the loving and wise guidance of Sr. Laura.

Jadwiga was neither a Sister nor a postulant, therefore, she received a monthly salary. However, she did not keep it. She gave it back to Sr. Laura so that she might use it for all those young people living around them who were so poor.

She was ready to continue in this way until old age. But then why not enter and become part of the Institute? It was because she thought she did not have the right to do so.

One doctor after another told her that her health was too precarious. She had serious lung problems and might become a burden to the community.

She shed many tears. Sr. Laura helped her by obtaining effective treatment for her and guided her until she made her

profession. In 1938 she enrolled her in philosophy and theology courses at the university.⁸⁹

Other young women arrived with their luggage, determined to stay. They immediately met Sr. Laura and felt an inner strength flow out from her that surrounded them and at the same time evoked in them a profound, serious questions: “Why am I here? What do I really want?”

Her fascination did not cause subjection; it was rather a liberating force.

Sr. Leokadia Deskiewicz stated that at every encounter:

...she showed joy and friendliness, but at the same time she had a special gift of foreseeing if that particular person had come with a right intention or if, instead, she had purely human goals. I remember how, one time, she did not accept a young woman who seemed to us to be gentle, polite and pious. We were even surprised that she did not want to accept her. It was discovered later that the girl had been sent with devious and insincere intentions.⁹⁰

Here is another special vocation story that chronologically belongs much later. In fact, this young woman entered the Institute a few days before Mother Laura’s death. The young woman in question was, however, a sister of Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak, little Bożena, and her story is very closely interwoven with the story just told.

When Jadwiga entered the Institute in 1932, Bożena, the last member of the family, was still a very small child, having been

⁸⁹ In 1951 this Sister was the first to begin collecting the main information regarding the life of Mother Laura. Thus a typed booklet entitled, *The Great Heart of a Mother*, was widely circulated in Poland. In the 70s this booklet was translated into Italian. It was then that mother general and the general council entrusted Sr. Domenica Grassiano with the task of undertaking a deeper research, which led to the publication of the already quoted biography entitled *In the Land of the Birch Trees*. Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak is also remembered for having been the link between Mother Laura and the Sisters imprisoned in Vilnius during World War II. She died at Ostrow Wielkopolski in 1995.

⁹⁰ *Summarium* 176.

born in 1929.⁹¹ She was there at the station of Łódź with her mother, father, and older sister to say goodbye to the departing Jadwiga. As she waved her little hand, she understood deep down, that something beautiful was happening.

Later she often went with her mother to visit Jadwiga. She felt comfortable in the Sisters' house, it was like home.

Then war broke out. Bożena was just blossoming into adolescence when, with her older sister, she was taken by the Germans and packed off in a freight train that carried them far away to the front. They were made to dig trenches to slow the Russian advance.

It was a very long calvary surrounded by dangers every hour of every day.

When she was miraculously able to return, Bożena brought with her an ugly eye disease that was diagnosed as keratitis, together with other complications regarding her vision. She suffered constant headaches and photophobia that required her to wear dark glasses.

The young Bożena was subjected to a string of clinical examinations and x-rays. The final verdict was that she not only suffered from the complaint already diagnosed, but also from an internal illness that was difficult to define. She stated:

At times the inflammation was so bad that I could only raise my eyelids with the aid of my fingers.

There were periods of remission that allowed me to attend school, even though my family was against it. They wanted me to abandon my studies, but the principal, Mr. Józef Gniazdowski, a very noble educator, opposed this decision. In this way, I completed middle school and went on to high school specialising in economics. I always remained in contact with Mother Laura by letter.

On the occasion of Christmas 1948 she had a personal encounter that she could never forget. Bożena wrote:

The fascinating goodness of Mother Laura, the spirituality and humility that emanated from her influenced me in such a way that,

⁹¹ Cf. "Storia della mia vocazione", in *Copia Publica* 1800 sgg.

after that brief stay and some personal conversations, I felt that place would become my home and that Mother Laura would introduce me to a life of consecration to the Lord.

It was then that she decided to complete her studies at any cost, entrusting herself to her very special principal. He understood and looked after things. He excused her absences in moments of renewed illness, saw to it that her companions would help her with notes, and even that they should write for her when she could not do so. He also arranged for her to take the examinations on different days from those set, and thus led her to obtain her diploma without, however, giving in to her disability.

Mother Laura kept herself informed, encouraged her, and she prayed.

Easter of 1950 arrived. Bożena wrote of that encounter:

Mateczka was suffering very much. She was seated in an armchair and I was beside her with my head down because of the trouble with my eyes. At a certain point, she said to me, ‘Yes, now you are going, but for a short time. When you come next time, you will stay forever’. I burst into tears. She reflected for a few moments and putting her hand on my knee said with strength and emotion, ‘Bożena, what are you thinking? You must not think like that’; then in a lower voice, ‘You will be well; I am praying for you’.

At the end of June a telegram announced to Mother Laura, “Final examination went very well”. The answer was, “I am waiting for you”.

On July 21, Bożena arrived; and she stayed forever. She would write much later:

I have belonged to the Institute for twenty-nine years and I work as a catechist. During all this time I have not had any further treatment and the eye trouble from which I had suffered never returned. I am convinced that Mother Laura has taken care of me even after her death.

Empty pockets, but a heart of gold

There was just one thing that was not going well. Money was always lacking.

For example, in one of her letters to Sr. Zofia Sowińska, Mother Laura wrote:

*I don't have a cent and I rack my brain every day and at every minute. It is an agony because everyone wants money and I have none. [...] For the house of Łódź I must go to that gentleman to arrange something practical and to get our money! Oh, if I could only get my 13,000 lire!*⁹²

However, the agony of Mother Laura regarding money only occupied a superficial level of her personality. Deep down, as in the sea, calm reigned, an invincible calm that had its roots in Gospel certainty.

One day Jesus proclaimed:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body. [...] Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. [...] Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.⁹³

While she tried to provide for everyone, she would say to the Sisters:

- Providence will remedy it.⁹⁴

- Do not be afraid; the Lord is with us everywhere, and everything is given to us by his hand.

⁹² Dalcerci, op.cit. lettera, 26 marzo 1930.

⁹³ Mt. 6:25-29.

⁹⁴ Sr. Matylda Sikorska, in *Summarium* 49. "Mother Laura was a person of hope. She lived this virtue in a significant way and knew how to awaken it in each of us. [...] In times of shortage, when many necessities were lacking, especially during World War II, which also destroyed many of our communities, Sr. Laura encouraged us, saying, 'Providence will remedy it'. During severe trials she prayed, 'Oh merciful Jesus', and in favourable times she repeated spontaneously, 'Thank you God'."

- Let us trust in Divine Providence and in the help of the Mother of God.

She begged for the help of Providence, not only in prayer but also with an attitude that is difficult to assume: that of one who asks. She did this with love and dignity, not as a humiliated beggar. She was a builder of bridges and paths, who involved all those who should or could collaborate in the undertaking. Asking was certainly difficult for the person whose nature was deeply rooted in a social class that was more used to guiding and deciding than depending on the free choice of others! In reality, while she paid that price of humiliation, she guided, enlightened, and provided friends and authorities with an opportunity to see needs and open their hands.

For example, she wrote:

What response did the local authorities make to our account? Will they give us some money? And the educational authority? Did our accountant note that [besides the usual] we give a main course? Put it in. I desire it, rather I want it.

*Let us pray for a subsidy, for something to come in an unexpected way, let us pray and offer something that costs.*⁹⁵

Have you no news from the local authorities yet? [...] Hasn't the accountant received the 1,000 zloty? My God, it is horrible how slow they are in doing these things!

*Let us work for God always, always, with the purest, holiest intention, which is to give glory to God and do good for souls. Let it be one long act of love, of faith, of charity.*⁹⁶

All this took place in Poland, where she tried to assert the rights of the orphans and the poor with the established authorities. In Italy instead, she turned to her friends whose sensitivity she knew. They were people of noble families and with good financial resources whom she had known in Catania, Sicily. She received much from them.

⁹⁵ A suor Zofia Sowińska 27 febbraio 1930, in Dalcerci, op. cit., lettera 24.

⁹⁶ Op.cit., marzo, 1930.

Little by little, she managed to meet such people also in Poland.

The *Summarium* notes that economic problems never clashed with her generosity. The economy forced her to deal with numbers. Her goodness of heart, animated by Gospel convictions, led her to give without calculating.

She wrote in a previously quoted letter:

*Stefania will bring you two hundred eggs and ten kilos of honey that you can give to the Sisters at breakfast and afternoon tea. We can also give them to the priest. See how Providence always helps us. Oh, how good the Lord is! Thank Sr. Jadwiga for the news she gives me. I recommend that you care for the kitchen and for the children. Let them be treated well, and the resident students also, that all may praise the Lord joyfully and without complaints.*⁹⁷

Mother Laura dealt this way, not only with the people of the house, but was also generous in giving to other people, even those who had responded badly to her kindness. Here is an example that speaks loud and clear. Bożena Dudziak recounted:

At Pogrzebień there was a very poor family, with the surname Nowak. Mother Laura supported them systematically with food parcels and the children came to the Sisters' house every day for dinner. However, on one occasion the mother, a woman with a difficult character, spoke insulting words about the Sisters in a public place. Someone who was present reported it to the community and the novice formator informed Mother Laura. Later she saw her, as usual, preparing the parcel for the Nowak family. 'They speak badly about us, Mother, and are you still sending them this package?' Mother Laura, calmly replied, 'We will get it back in heaven'.⁹⁸



⁹⁷ Op.cit., lettera 26.

⁹⁸ Cf. *Summarium* 169.

Remaining with the topic of finances, sources record that, with regard to money, 1930 ended deeply in the red. Providence did arrive, but it seemed to like keeping the very faithful Mother Laura, with all her equally faithful Sisters always hanging on by a thread. Attempts to balance finances are neither useless nor negative. Rather, they are useful to encourage people to persevere in the prayer of petition and to maintain the capacity for creativity.

However, when it came to providing for people's formation, she did not count the cost. There were already thirty-two Sisters and twenty-five novices, but in this area, numbers were not enough, quality also needed to be considered. The quality was really good; 'good material' as Don Bosco would say.

The seed that had been sown in the earth eight years earlier was excellent. Consequently, the shoots and ears of grain had grown strong and were filled with vitality. There had also been good discernment in admissions and this had contributed a lot to the success.

Besides, there was a profound day to day commitment to understanding people and culture. Sr. Laura, without renouncing anything of the authentic values of her Italian background, had made herself Polish in her ways. She knew how to go the extra mile, and thus not only had dialogue been established, but also a spontaneous fusion between the best of the Latin and the Slavonic cultures. And it could not have been otherwise, because Salesian humanism, with its Gospel roots and its methods characterised by reason, religion, and loving kindness, is at home in every part of the world.

Sr. Aniela asked one day:

- Mother, how must I live my days to make them ever more fruitful?
- Always and at every moment, preserve union with God. Keep watch over yourself, in this way you will avoid even small failures and you will fall in love with God alone. Always be humble, kind and united with God. Always be faithful in fulfilling your duties so

that in the evening you will be able to say: 'I have done all that I could'.⁹⁹

These spiritual recommendations are constantly repeated and reaffirmed, in conversations, in letters and in her life.

For example, Mother Laura said to Sr. Stanisława Młodzinska:

Be really humble, because humility is the principal virtue for a religious. Recommend yourself very much to Our Lady; tell her to take you under her mantle and teach you to live as she did, always in harmony with everyone, always dear to all, because she was kind, generous, and sacrificing.

Holy cheerfulness, refinement in ways, an eternal smile, kind replies and think well of all; this is the work that we must do to become saints in Don Bosco's way, and have great love for all, especially the girls.

Well done. I know that you all agree, you are all full of good will. Good, always be like that, always kind, motherly, and even more motherly with the little ones whom I feel that I love and carry in my heart. Love these little souls, as if they were your own.

*Form in yourselves one heart and one soul. Love one another very much, and understand each other and as the sun sets, may all bad humour and misunderstanding also set, never to be seen again.*¹⁰⁰

There are many other words like these. But, why not take up the book of her letters? In it you will find treasures for your life.

Formation as daily bread

To deal adequately with the topic of the formation given by Mother Laura, another book would undoubtedly be needed. There would easily be sufficient material for a degree thesis. What follows will be nothing like that. There will be no theories advanced, nor will situations be deeply analysed, looking at them from the north, south, east and west.

⁹⁹ Grassiano, op. cit., 83.

¹⁰⁰ Dalcerci, op. cit., lettere 136, 200, 209, 221.

Everything about Mother Laura was formative, so much so that one might question whether this chapter has a place in this book. It could well be superfluous and even repetitive with regard to all the rest. In fact, Mother Laura had the gift of forming others by the example of her life with her attitudes, her words, her tone in speaking, teachings, and making choices. All those who knew her say so.

What follows are some examples of her formative intervention. They are gathered together here because, while they do not fit into the chronological chapters, they seem too significant to lose.

Therefore, here are a few very brief illustrations:

- The Sisters' house in Rózanystok had wooden floors. They were not of polished wood in which one could see oneself. They were quite rough and every so often they had to be scrubbed with a hand brush.

The girls did not go barefoot, both to avoid wading in the soapy water and to avoid getting splinters in their feet. They had special shoes for this work and had to wear them.

One of these girls thought it more convenient to disobey. When she saw Mother Laura approaching, she made an acrobatic leap to get away and hide in order to put on her shoes.

There was a comical side to the incident and the assistant, Sr.Matylda Sikorska began to laugh.

"If you laugh..." Mother Laura said to her and went away.

Sr.Matylda understood and made the following comment. "This was enough to make me aware of the situation. Ashamed of my mistake, I ran to Mother to ask pardon. Seriously and with great simplicity Mother Laura replied: 'Next time be more careful'."

Every order she gave was well thought through beforehand and given with love. However, if she had to repeat the same observation a second time, she made it clearly understood that this was not constructive.

She resolutely demanded the correction of faults; and if the failures were against charity, she wanted us to ask pardon. She also asked this act of justice and humility of the children. If it were a Sister who showed some rudeness toward a girl, she asked her to correct her error immediately.¹⁰¹

The following are a short series of episodes narrated by Sr. Matylda. Mother Laura taught people to understand and love each other.

- It was dawn. Sr. Matylda should have rung the bell for rising, but she did not awaken. The chaplain knocked repeatedly at the door but could not get in. Later, a crestfallen Sr. Matylda presented herself to *Mateczka* who said, "Everything is all right. There is not even a shadow of sin. You slept like an angel".

"She always knew how to communicate peace. However, she demanded sincerity, obedience, and good manners from everyone."

- It was a very cold day in winter. Sr. Matylda went to draw water from the well, but then she coughed and coughed. She had a high temperature. Mother Laura said, "Remember that your life is not your own". In fact, she had developed severe bronchitis.

Sr. Matylda went to bed and Mother Laura looked after her, "...like the most tender of mothers". "She came to visit me and brought me something hot. Her smile, so full of love and peace was, for me, a profound meditation and did me more good than any medication."

- Matylda Sikorska was then a young professed Sister. She needed to return from Laurów to Miślowice but did not have the money for the train. Mother Laura was on the playground. She gave her a key:

'The money is in the second drawer on the left, take what you need'. I came back to her and said anxiously, 'Mother, there is very little left'. She replied, 'It does not matter; you are my daughter. Providence will think of us'.

The Sister commented:

¹⁰¹ Grassiano op. cit., 76; *Summarium* 61.

The memory of her virtues remains alive in our hearts and urges us on in the life of perfection. It keeps alive in us the desire to be the kind of FMA she wanted us to be.¹⁰²



The focus now changes. It moves far away and back in time.

The place is Alì Marina, spoken of in Chapter 1, on the shores of the Ionic sea in the years 1912-1915.

A young resident student, whose name is not recorded, had to spend much time alone. She would have liked to boast of being a candidate, but her health was not very promising and there were family difficulties.

In any case, there she was, and Sr. Laura took responsibility for her, confident that sooner or later she would manage to call her 'daughter'.

The girl slept in a single room, not in the dormitory like her school companions. Deep down there was no reason for this except that she liked it that way.

The community animator did not give her long sermons. Sr. Laura did something better. She asked a favour of her. Would she be willing to help the Sister assistant who slept in the dormitory with the orphans? The girl could not have asked for anything better and got used to the dormitory.

She was afraid of the dark. So another favour was asked of her. Would she take responsibility for lighting the oil-lamps on the upper floors in the evening?

On the first evening, besides the darkness, the young woman had to face the roaring of a storm at sea, but she forced herself. She overcame her fear because she would never say no to the gentle Sr. Laura. She ascended the stairs humming, then she noticed that her fear was gone with the wind.

She would later write:

¹⁰² *Summarium* 65, 71.

I saw how the superior, who had accompanied me with her eyes, smiled happily. She wanted me to be strong and I am still grateful to her today for all her kindness and incomparable delicacy.

Returning to Poland...

- Young Maria Lipińska presented herself to Mother Laura to be admitted to the Institute.

She thought that religious houses were inhabited only by angelic people. How would she cope with all her baggage of character faults?

Mother Laura replied, “But I am sure you do not want those defects? Therefore, be tranquil. We all have our flaws, but we must not make peace with them. We must always fight them, but calmly and with serenity”.

Sr. Maria commented:

Mother Laura was always encouraging with everyone. She was energetic when faced with frivolousness and wilful failures, but showed immeasurable understanding for involuntary mistakes, that result from human weakness.

For us, then, Mother Laura was a priceless treasure, almost like an oasis in the desert. One could discern the presence of God in her person. Close to her we felt good, happy, and tranquil as children. She transmitted harmony to us.

Another Sister continued, almost poetically, “She was like a faithful treasure chest of Don Bosco’s spirit, resplendent as an example of Salesian virtue. What about her life? It was a great flame of charity”.¹⁰³

Almost echoing the former, here is what Sr. Ottylia Lichota who was an oratorian when she got to know Mother Laura at Myslowice, had to say:

When I first saw her I felt she was a special person, of great spiritual richness and a marvellous motherliness. One could go to her at any time and for anything without fear and in complete confidence.

¹⁰³ Cf. *Copia Publica* 1609.

Later, when Sr. Ottylia was assistant to the novices, *Mateczka* gave her this advice:

Before saying anything to the young people, think and pray. Do not remain attached to the letter of the law, but always be charitable and understanding. Look upon each novice as one would look on a child who is learning to walk. They fall often, but when they have learned, they do not do so. Always be a unifying element between the formator and the novices.¹⁰⁴

Sr. Maria Pytel offered the following precious and frequently meditated statements:

Mother Laura, as I remember her, always acted with authentic dignity, but she was never authoritarian. She showed herself resolute but not obstinate. Always patient and understanding, she knew how to listen to the pros and cons, she was neither too condescending nor indulgent, but rather demanded commitment and fidelity, as she required of herself. In crucial times she was always able to overcome herself, but she called evil by its proper name. However, she emphasised the good much more. She was ready to help both her Sisters and other people.¹⁰⁵

Here is another voice to conclude this overview, that of Sr. Weronika Milewska, during a live interview with Sr. Domenica Grassiano¹⁰⁶:

When I asked to enter the Institute, Mother Laura said, ‘My dear, from now on you will be my daughter’. I still remember today, in 1979, the private conversation I had with her on July 22, 1938, when I left for the novitiate. I wrote down her words and made them the programme for my life.

When war broke out, I had to return to my family, but I never thought of renouncing my vocation. The love I have for our Institute was inculcated in me by Mother Laura, who was the personification of Salesian holiness. The life of Mother Laura was all love.



¹⁰⁴ Grassiano, op. cit., 78.

¹⁰⁵ *Summarium* 120.

¹⁰⁶ Grassiano, op. cit., Appendice III.

Mother Laura's work of formation also took place through the medium of pen and ink. Her letters multiplied, even by night.

Here are a few.

Mateczka wrote to two novices involved in practical training: With your arrival, you brought great joy to the Sisters there, who are most grateful to you. You have done very well in lending a hand wherever needed. This is how we must always feel in our houses, which are all the homes of our Spouse and of our religious family. [...] I believe you will already have your new superior, who has made a great sacrifice in accepting that destination with a calm that impressed us. When I told her that she was destined to act as superior at Nowa Ruda, she immediately responded, 'Fine, Mother; wherever you send me, I will go immediately'. The conversation then went on to another topic as if nothing had happened. This example indicates to us how we must learn to love the cross that the Lord sends to us in different forms. Take courage, my dears, Jesus is always with us and gives us his grace in every place and in every instant of our lives. For our part, we must be attentive not to lose any opportunity that can help us to know Jesus better.¹⁰⁷

The above was a lesson in life through a very clear example, what follows is enlightening encouragement, an efficacious rule, a well-chosen and constructive wish for the beginning of a mission:

- You tell me you are convinced that there is only one way to resolve all the daily difficulties of life. This way is to love the cross for love of Jesus. I am really happy with this and recommend with all my heart that you continue in this way and your life will always be pleasing to the Lord.

You really are my consolation and I appreciate you very much. I am sure that you will become holy by saving many souls.¹⁰⁸

- Act in such a way that people can see the living Rule in you. Try to be good, always and with everyone. Be understanding and sacrifice yourself without pause as a mother does for her children.

¹⁰⁷ Dalcerci, op. cit., lettera 193.

¹⁰⁸ Op. cit., lettera 159 (a suor Maria Lipinska).

Goodness of heart will suggest what you should do in every circumstance. [...] Your duty will also include your having to make observations to your helpers. When you see that there is something that does not please the Lord, say it sincerely, but kindly, at an opportune moment, and face to face. Thus, the guilty person will understand her mistake and desire to correct herself. Never give corrections when you are feeling a bit nervous or see that the other person is not calm. If you have to make some observation, pray for the person to whom you must make it, that the Lord may give her the necessary grace to receive it well and apply it in life.¹⁰⁹

- I am happy that you have arrived safely; full of good will and love of God, and that you have started your mission. [...] Act in such a way as to be one with your superior and that your house may be a dwelling of Jesus that is pleasing to him. Be like the prudent virgins of the Gospel, keep your lamps always lit, that is, practise the Rule in all its parts and try to make progress in virtue and in union with God.

Let there never be jealousy among you, nor moodiness, always be cheerful, serene, content with everything and always ready for any sacrifice as long as it gives glory to God. Treat each other well, very gently, never raise your voices and always smile. Treat the girls well, but everyone in their place, so there may not be any frivolity.

Be angels of kindness, and wherever you can, help everyone, but always according to the Rule, in order to have the Lord's blessing.¹¹⁰



The name of Sr. Elżbieta Fująówna has already been briefly mentioned, but it is worth recalling again.

She was the animator at Przemyśl, in a community of just three, dedicated to the work of the Salesian brothers. They lived in poverty, worked in a basement kitchen, and their house adjoined the stable. However, the atmosphere was joyful, all smiles and total self-giving, that is, never a complaint or a sigh. Sr. Elżbieta

¹⁰⁹ Op. cit., lettera 147 (a suor Elżbieta Fująówna).

¹¹⁰ Op. cit., lettera 211 (all'inizio di una casa).

and her two companions felt happy to be able to contribute to the Christian formation of so many poor and needy boys.

It happened that at a certain point Mother Laura needed one of those two. This was her way of asking and it was a true masterpiece of elegant kindness.

*My dear Elżbieta, you have an opportunity to offer a little sacrifice to Jesus and to do me a great favour, but I beg you to do it willingly and wholeheartedly... I need Sr. Julia and will have to take her from your house... I will send you a postulant who can help you in the kitchen, and then, I know how capable you are... The postulant is very good. Be a true mother to her and prepare her well for the novitiate... Offer everything to Jesus to obtain the grace of being able to open the novitiate and have many holy vocations who will help in our works for the greater glory of God. Take courage, my dear; time passes quickly; let us work only with a view to eternity.*¹¹¹

How is this letter formative? Could it not have aroused hundreds of complaints?

Yes, read without any reference to the real situation, it could have led to comments such as, "... we were three and now we are reduced to two! Does our provincial understand how much work we have?"

However, the recipient knew the sender; she knew the weight of her words, how they had been reflected on in her heart, and in prayer. She knew the witness given by the one who penned them.

Here is another letter, still to Elżbieta Fujówna, who was community animator at that time. It was just at the moment in which she had been juridically nominated, thus ceasing to be acting animator:

As I said to you during my last visit to your house, up until now, you have been responsible like an older sister. Now I am sending your nomination as superior, received from our beloved superiors. From now on, your Sisters will call you Sr. Superior and will obey you as

¹¹¹ Op. cit., lettera 145.

such. However, when you receive this letter of mine, take the Rule in hand and carefully read all that refers to your new task. I will add here, some directives of my own, that you may impress them well on your mind and heart.

First of all, try to give good example to your Sisters and to all who approach you. May they see in you the living Rule. Try always to be kind to everyone, especially with the Sisters that God has entrusted to you, then with the Salesians, the girls who work in the house, etc.

Always be understanding and self-sacrificing, like a mother, who unceasingly looks after her children. Goodness of heart will suggest what you should do in every circumstance. Care for your health and that of your Sister, as well as that of the young people who help you. If you see that someone is not well, try to take care of her with thoughtfulness, that she may be restored to health as soon as possible.

Lack of care can even be a cause of death. Be attentive that all have sufficient rest because excessive work and no sleep or insufficient rest can exhaust physical strength and do much damage to the spiritual life.

You work in the house of our dear confreres and sacrifice yourselves much, sometimes too much. That is good but a certain balance is needed in everything.

The letter is longer and touches on various significant topics.

One was concerned with relationships with different people. They should always be, “kind, helpful, courteous, but at the same time serious”, not easygoing or overindulgent, but, “angels that attract people to goodness”.

Something that was certainly fundamental for those working in a basement kitchen and had mainly walls as their horizon, was the sense of belonging to the Institute that was as wide as the world, and as intense as the ideal for which they had given their lives. The animator must inform, tell, and make known. What would Mother Laura have said if she had present day means of communication at her disposal?

Another regarded the Good Night. It should be short, and given every evening. Certainly not just to the other Sister, but also

to the girls who worked in the house. If for some reason these were not present ...

She also dealt with the weekly encounter and the monthly personal conversation.

This should not be surprising for the sons and daughters of St. Francis de Sales, for whom there was no difference between one member of the faithful, perhaps elderly and a bit sleepy, and a whole diocese to be dealt with while wearing a mitre and carrying a pastoral staff.

“So that you may be able to do all of this, you must, in the first place, confide totally in the Lord”.¹¹²



It is well-known that Sr. Zofia Sowińska kept many letters from Mother Laura. Only a few extracts are quoted here, even though they all offer precious lines of personal, community, and missionary formation, as well as practical guidelines for all that regards economic and institutional needs.

- *Sofia, I recommend that you work calmly and always smile. Work with religious decorum and let there be nothing worldly in you, but be humble and do all under the gaze of God [...], because our only aim is to make ourselves holy. Let us become holy, Sr. Sofia, since time is quickly passing and death is approaching with giant steps. Let us work on ourselves to prove our love for Jesus.*

- *Oh, if you only knew, if you could read the great desire I have in my heart to help you all to become holy, especially you, to whom God has given so much to be able to help the Institute.*

You are right, my dear; you do little work on yourself in the spirit, which is the principal part to which we must continually dedicate our care and our zeal. It is the strict duty of a good religious to work continually, at every moment, on our dominant passion. You know what your dominant passion is: pride and lack of charity toward your neighbour and this is the cause of often seeing evil and bad will in those around you. Be courageous and work, work to

¹¹² Op. cit., lettera 147.

improve yourself, to make your soul beautiful and to enrich it with infinite merits.

I will help you, if you will allow yourself to be helped, if you will listen to me and, humbly practise what I will say to you.¹¹³

- I read your letter and I understand very well that you are tired, and therefore you easily become irritable and then suffer for having been irritated.

Believe once and for all what I have always been telling you, that is, that irritation, instead of fixing every issue, spoils everything. You believe that if you shout, you have done well. No, my dear, you have only done harm, and instead of helping souls you have embittered them and nothing more.

I do not want you to give corrections at table, where there should be a holy joy, where the pupils should be united and form one heart. Call the Sister privately and say what is needed, but face to face. Otherwise the religious house becomes a hell and God no longer blesses it. For love of Our Lady and for peace in the house never get irritated.¹¹⁴



Could she offer formation even to a priest, one to whom she owed infinite gratitude? One who knew he was risking his life when he celebrated the sacred mysteries of redemption in secret for the Sisters?

Yes, even to him. It was the priest himself who recorded it. He was Fr. Jonas Žemajtis who the reader will meet again later in this story. He was a Salesian in disguise, sent by the government authorities at a very difficult moment to direct all the educational work in Laurów, and was believed to be in a certain sense, ‘against the Sisters’.

This is what ‘Mr. Jonas’ revealed about himself during the Canonical Process.

¹¹³ Op. cit., lettere 18, 29.

¹¹⁴ Op. cit., lettera 67.

After having spent a good while among the Sisters, I noticed that many of them were young and beautiful. Without wanting it, I had already made some choices. I was taken aback at the moment of giving them Communion. Perhaps it was a just at this time in which I found myself in the eye of the storm, when I discovered a note on my desk saying, 'Fr. Rector, I love you very much' and the signature. It was from her.

I was used to seeking advice from Mother in moments of difficulty, but in this case, I lacked courage to do so. Yet I went. Seeing me struggle, Mother Laura helped me as if she could see within me. She did not show surprise. Rather, she showed motherly compassion.

Isn't it true that we love Jesus Christ, that we would never wrong him. Let us think about what our love cost him. Then our heart will become more generous. She spoke without humiliating, or discouraging. For example, I should pretend I never saw the note. The imprudent young woman would look for it anxiously, to remove it.

When we consecrated ourselves to the Lord, we did not place any conditions, for example, not meeting difficulties.

It seemed to me as if my disordered feelings dissipated like the fog before the sun.

She said that it should be easier for us priests to overcome temptations than for a young woman, because we have clothed ourselves with the *alter Christus*.

What about priests who had abandoned their vocation?

Her response came quickly, 'They have lost the sense of the divine, and so they have gone back to being mere men'. Then she explained it in this way, 'Some priests have forgotten who they are. For them, even Mass becomes a church affair, while for a faithful priest it is always the first Mass'.¹¹⁵



At this point would not a brief reference to animals be in order? Do animals have a place in a discussion regarding formation?

¹¹⁵ *Summarium* 463.

Why not? It is not a question of forming these creatures of the good God, but of forming people, helping them to develop admiration, respect, kindness also toward animals. This is no small thing. It means moulding the mind and heart, and also encouraging the necessary sense of responsibility toward everything that comes from the unparalleled plan of the Lord our God.

Here is what can be found in the testimony of Sr. Maria Lipińska:

In her lively spirit of faith and great charity, Mother Laura embraced the whole universe, even in the natural world that surrounded us because in everything she saw the hand of God. She also had some uncommon views about the animals we cared for. She recommended that the Sisters be attentive so that the animals should not suffer too much, especially from hunger. She said, 'When man suffers he merits an eternal reward, but the animals do not. Their happiness is purely natural, a happiness that ends with this life; therefore, why deprive them of these brief and passing satisfactions?'¹¹⁶

It would seem that her kindness was somehow reciprocated. Two people speak of her 'Franciscan gift' with the ducks. When they were scattered everywhere, creating a mad racket and not wanting to hear of obeying, the Sister in charge would call on the help of *Mateczka* and, from the terrace, she would let them hear her magic flute so that they would gently get into line, just like, The Little Ducks of the Swamp by Renzo Pezzani and waddle off to their enclosure.

Here is something that does not refer either to ducks or to rhinos, but refers instead to the popular game of the lottery.

Is it about formation? Who knows, but it is a nice story and worth remembering.

In a letter addressed to Sr. Zofia Sowińska on October 9, 1937, she wrote:

¹¹⁶ *Summarium* 440.

*Let us buy a ticket with the same number that I already had in the lottery, because I always hope to win something and pay all our debts. Oh, would that the Lord might give me this grace!*¹¹⁷

To win the lottery? A grace from God? But is it not beautiful to see that even the saints can have such dreams?

However, there is always the usual ‘but’... Can the Lord manage to enter the narrow, little shop of the lottery? How does God manage in the midst of all those intrigues?

¹¹⁷ Dalcerci, op. cit., lettera 94.

Chapter Three

THE PROVINCE IS BORN

In the name of the Virgin Mary

It was 1931, and the vigil of the Epiphany. A celebration was taking place in Vilnius. Why?

There had been a family event: the arrival of the new Salesian Provincial. According to the record of the time, he was welcomed by the girls with songs and poems; and he responded with encouraging kindness, marking a new beginning in life for everyone. The provincial was Fr. Antoni Symior and he was of great spiritual and formative importance in the history of the Salesians.¹¹⁸

Sr. Laura left that same day. She went to accompany the Sisters who were to start a new foundation in Sokołów Podlaski. Her journey was rather hurried since she had to return to Vilnius as quickly as possible. More than 100 children, between three and six years of age, were expected to arrive from Warsaw.

They were given economic assistance by the office of the Warsaw magistrate and were coming to join the girls who were already the responsibility of the magistrate of Vilnius. Thus, the apostolate increased and at the same time some extra financial support could be expected.

The house chronicle related:

The whole community is working hard to prepare what is required for the new children. The animator is like a real mother, she directs, orders, suggests. She does not consider tiredness or expense, in order to obtain what is best for those dear little angels.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Cf. Ceria, Eugenio, op.cit, vol. IV 163.

¹¹⁹ *Cronaca* di Vilnius, 16 gennaio 1931.

There was a celebration on January 18 because the children had arrived. Sr. Francesca Barucco immediately became like a mother and a protective mantle to them. She had the overall responsibility for all the groups that were created.

A month later a truly historic event occurred. Nine years had passed since the arrival in Poland of the first group of FMA who were full of hope and decisive, heroic generosity. Now a most welcome letter had arrived bearing an official seal, which did not close the past, but opened up a fruitful future.

The letter, dated February 2, 1931, came from Turin where the centre of the Institute was now situated. It announced that the communities in Poland had been:

...elevated to the status of a pre-Province, confirming the authority given until now by circumstances to the Rev. Sr. Laura Meozzi, as one who, having been placed as the leader of the first group in that nation, has always sought to maintain the consistency and development of the works entrusted to us by Divine Providence [...]. Sr Meozzi will not cease to be the superior of the house where she is at present and will continue to have the title of Superior.¹²⁰

What great joy in Poland. Sr. Laura would legally become ‘mother’ for all the FMA there. She was already this in their hearts and in their speech, as by now they were accustomed to call her affectionately, *Mateczka*.

The newborn pre-province would be entitled Mary Help of Christians. She would be the protector of each person and the motivator of every activity.



¹²⁰ The *Informatio*, page 122, adds the following information, “In order to assist her in this work the following were appointed: two Councillors, Sr. Maria Mazzoli and Sr. Anna Juzek, Superiors respectively of Rózanystok and Mysłowice; Sr. Cleofe Broggin as Secretary and Novice Director; and Sr. Maria Giebel, Superior of Łódź, as the Bursar”. The document was signed by Sr. Clelia Genghini, the Secretary General.

There is a very significant letter of that time written by the Nuncio, Francesco Marmaggi to Mother Laura. It is one of the few in existence of those she received.

Giving her a gentle reminder, the bishop wrote:

*You are strong and robust, animated by the good will to work for the Lord in his holy apostolate among poor young people. That is good. It is not necessary to force ourselves to do more than duty requires, especially after an illness. To speak plainly, that is more than Jesus asks of us right now. Jesus wants you now to take more of a directive interest than an executive one. Therefore, this also is the will of God which you must respect and worship. In the evening (I will also give you this command) at ten o'clock, enough: silence and rest in your room!*¹²¹

Then in this delightful letter the bishop jokingly thanked her for the gifts received, "Those birettas with the red ribbons make me seem like a big rooster with a flaming crest"; "And the little flags! With those raised on high I will declare war on all of Hell."

However, he also wrote, "...what delicate thoughtfulness...it makes me feel that I am being assisted by my own family".

Was Sr. Laura not like a mother?

There was another letter from this same time which provided equally pleasing reading. It came from Mother Laura herself, sent from Myslowice and addressed to all her, "dear Sisters big and small".

*I left the heat of Vilnius to come here and catch a terrible cold. All night from Vilnius to Warsaw, I trembled like a leaf in the wind. In Warsaw cold, ice, and rain. If I don't get pneumonia now I never will. However, do not worry: I will be fine and wish to be back among you as soon as possible. Fortunately, I found the Sisters here well, and today I will begin to talk and do what I can: help me with your prayers.*¹²²

Oh, the sacred wounds of Jesus; love them much, and take shelter in them with confidence. Have a filial love for Our Lady, a loving

¹²¹ 19 gennaio 1932; *Summarium* 523.

¹²² Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 203, 11 maggio 1932.

*confidence. Turn to her, sure that whatever you ask, you will be heard. Let there be sisterly love among you, great charity, the charity of Jesus, united hearts, the Family Spirit.*¹²³

The months preceding summer were very busy.

February, March, and April saw a lively, intense apostolate in every community. They had to prepare adults and children for the Eucharistic Congress that would be held in Vilnius on May 7 and 8, with the participation of all the Polish bishops accompanied by a multitude of the faithful. Groups of religious and young people would be given hospitality in the Sacred Heart community.

Immediately after this, Mother Laura left for Turin. She had been invited to celebrate the feast of Mary Help of Christians and the retreat that followed under the dome of the one who had done and would continue to do everything in the field of the Lord Jesus.

During the journey, Mother Laura accompanied by Sr. Cleofe Brogginì, prayed for the first time before Our Lady of Częstochowa.

In one of her welcome letters *Mateczka* wrote:

*I prayed for everyone so that Our Lady would bless and comfort you...the train is moving so I am writing as best as I can...I feel as if I left you a year ago but it has only been three days.*¹²⁴

A little later she wrote from Turin:

*Yesterday I was in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians and spent nine and a half hours there throughout the day. I prayed for everyone and asked for infinite graces for our houses in Poland.*¹²⁵

¹²³ The letter also illustrates Mother Laura's interest in the individual person. "Take care of Sr. Sofia; make sure that she eats well and is cheerful. Make sure that Sr. Imperowicz takes the medicine the doctor gave her and tell Sr. Deręgowska that she must aim high to get to heaven. I recommend that you all love our little angels and the girls." It will be seen that the two Sisters named here, Helena Imperowicz and Anna Deręgowska, would die the next year, offering their own lives for Mother Laura.

¹²⁴ Dalcerrì, op.cit., lettera 37, 21 maggio 1931.

¹²⁵ Ibid. lettera 41, 25 maggio 1931.

She went from one shrine of Our Lady to the other creating a bridge of grace and life; a bridge of hope and endless love.



Mother Laura actually experienced a foretaste of death.

In Turin she had already begun to suffer: a bad cough, a persistent cold, a preoccupying lack of energy. The Superior General, Mother Luisa Vaschetti, was aware that something was wrong, but neither she nor the others could foresee what would happen.

In a letter to Sr. Zofia Sowińska, among other things, Mother Laura wrote:

*How are you? Do you still suffer headaches? I could not continue the treatment because going up and down the stairs and remaining seated on those benches in church tired me terribly, therefore I had them prepare the medicine, but did not take it; I will bring it back to Poland and then we will see what can be done. Mother General told me to follow this treatment. We shall see if it will cure me; I really want it. I feel the need to stay well and work.*¹²⁶

On the return journey, the collapse occurred in Warsaw: a major heart attack. The doctor ordered her to be hospitalised with the Sisters of St. Elizabeth.

Despite immediate treatment, on June 15, Mother Laura was at the point of death. She was aware of it and desired only to encounter the mercy of the Lord.

When she was informed, Sr. Zofia joined her immediately. Sr. Bronia, the young and recently professed nurse was there, and from that moment on, would never again leave her *Mateczka*; until finally, several years later, when she truly reached the moment of death.

¹²⁶ Ibid. lettera 43: 1 giugno, 1931. “Farewell, my dear; become holy by being always cheerful, thinking and doing everything for Jesus.”

Mother Laura suffered greatly, but her only regret was not being among her Sisters. “I will never see them again.” She shed hot, painful tears. She cried for a long time; the will of God seemed excruciating.

Six critical weeks passed, then the will of God took on the colour of hope: the doctors granted Mother Laura a new passport to life.

The moment also came when she could bend over a small desk, dip her pen into the inkwell and write:

*I am sending you, dear Sisters, a cordial, a most cordial greeting, and a thank-you for the many prayers offered for me. May Jesus reward you. May your eyes and your hearts be fixed on Jesus and his most sacred wounds.*¹²⁷

The letter was short because of diminished strength, but between the lines, one could read the fullness of love and of abandonment to the Lord Jesus, of total self-giving to that mystery which is life and death. The Virgin Mary was always at Mother Laura’s side.

The devil’s tail?

The best air for convalescence was still that of Rózanystok. Therefore, half way through July *Mateczka* returned there.

Then, gradually she resumed her mission.

She was with the Sisters during the retreats; she presided at the religious professions on August 5.

The entrance into the novitiate of twenty-five novices took place on September 3 because some documentation had been delayed. Two of these left immediately for Italy. They were to be like a bridge between Poland and the living source of the Institute: a bridge that, from those early days until the outbreak of the war, would be renewed every year.

They went to Casanova, near Turin, where the new international novitiate had been founded, to coincide with the

¹²⁷ Ibid. lettera 202, 16 luglio 1931.

transfer, already taking place, of the central house of the Institute from Nizza Monferrato to Turin, Valdocco.

After these events of joyful hope, on September 6 Mother Laura began her travels again going to Poznań, which was anything but close, to accompany a group of Sisters who were attending a course for educators.

After that she travelled to the Vilnius area, where there was a countess with a difficult name, Umiastowska, who wanted to donate some land to a charitable work.¹²⁸ She then went back to Warsaw, to view a new house that could be opened soon. All of this took place in one month, September.

She travelled here and there.

At this point, there was a new obstacle. Mother Laura fell down the stairs in the Nunciature, those that she had just climbed to ask for aid, approval and blessings. She tumbled down and fractured her arm. But why did God send her to Poland and then always put a spoke in the wheel?

In order to understand at least a little, it is necessary to genuflect before the Gospel of the Lord Jesus.

One can read in the pages written by Domenica Grassiano:

She was taken to her room. One of her legs was painful, she could not move her right arm, and her face was badly bruised. In the dining room on that day she had said to her companion, 'I feel that something is going to happen to me. I will not be able to return home'.¹²⁹

In fact, she had to remain in Warsaw, and there in the chapel of the Nunciature, she received the perpetual vows of Sr. Julia Szostak, who had come from Różanystok for this purpose. Then

¹²⁸ In the community chronicle (September 5, 1931) one can read, "The issue required time and reflection, therefore no agreement was reached, but the necessary steps were initiated". It is not known what happened afterwards.

¹²⁹ Grassiano, op. cit., 95.

she was taken again to hospital. She was only able to return to Vilnius midway through October.

But in November she was stricken with a serious bout of bronchitis!

Mother Laura more or less took care of herself. Already on December 7 she was on her feet, to welcome the archbishop who had come for the pastoral visit. This was Archbishop Romuald Jałbrzykowski¹³⁰, who was very fond of the orphans and talked to them as a friend, listening to them when they recited poetry and read addresses for the occasion, praising them for their successes, admiring their devotion in chapel like so many little angels, and taking note of ways in which he could do more for them. By this time these orphans numbered 150.

The archbishop was like a father to everyone. Any Sister or other person who so desired, could speak to him frankly without hesitation or fear.

At the conclusion he wrote his overall comment in the appropriate notebook:

I am happy to see the Sisters so full of good spirit. They never seek themselves, but with sacrifice and self-denial, for the love of Christ, they fulfil their great and difficult mission. May the spirit of blessed Giovanni Bosco continue to enliven them so that they may increasingly engage in their apostolate both with the young people in their care and with those with whom they come in contact.

That had been a joyous interlude, but it appeared that the life of the Sisters there in Salesian Poland would fade away as a result of illness and harmful surprises.

This time, the reluctant person in question was Sr. Maria Mazzoli.

On February 4, 1932 she was in Warsaw. She had gone there to take care of some legal documents relating to a municipal school

¹³⁰ His name is closely linked to the devotion in Poland attributed to the image of Jesus, the Divine Mercy.

that had been passed on to the Sisters some time before. This was true, but with one little drawback. Instead of climbing and descending the difficult stairways of the government offices, she was bedridden in the hospital almost completely suffocated by raging pneumonia.

Then in April Sr. Zofia Sowińska was found doubled over in excruciating pain. She underwent emergency surgery and the community chronicle recorded it as a, “very difficult procedure” without describing what this was. However, Domenica Grassiano mentioned a tumour.

Mother Laura personally cared for these her Sisters. She rushed to Warsaw; she kept vigil first at one bed and then at the other. She assisted, and did her utmost, providing for everything even during the long and delicate period of convalescence.

It would be important here to name a wonderful and most patient nurse, Sr. Leokadia Daskiewicz,¹³¹ who went from one house to another, even if the journeys were long and arduous, and took care of the Sisters with delicate love.

Mother Laura, however, was not easily satisfied. The coffers of her province were anything but overflowing with money, but she did not stop to consider the finances. She rented a beautiful, big room in the Ursuline Sisters’ house in Czarny Bór for a month. It was situated in the middle of a green, balmy pine forest. She sent Sr. Zofia Sowińska, Sr. Anna Deręgowska, Sr. Wanda Brylińska and Sr. Bronia, whom the chronicle of Vilnius described as, “weak and anaemic” on holiday. She did not just send them, but she accompanied them.

¹³¹ This Sister gave a long, detailed statement to the Processes on the person and actions of Mother Laura. Born in 1920, Sr. Leokadia was at Mother Laura’s side both before and after the war. She worked as a nurse even outside the community. She also dedicated herself to the oratory and the orphanage with great apostolic zeal. “In every difficulty, Mother Laura said, ‘Everything comes from the hand of God’. The strength of her faith was always expressed in an extraordinary way, particularly in her declining years, when she suffered greatly and offered everything for the good of souls”.

She would have liked to stay with them for a short time but it was not possible. She was prevented from doing so by the fact that there were vacancies in Vilnius at that time, left by the Sisters she had sent on holiday.

Where? To the farm in Polepie. She wanted the Sisters to be refreshed, and stay well; the last thing she considered was her own insidious asthma, which attacked her ever more frequently.

Polepie had become a full-time summer residence. It was about thirty kilometres from Vilnius, and situated in a green, healthy area.

The orphans went there initially, but then, gradually also the day pupils and the children from the neighbourhood were sent by their families. The Sisters also went.

The various old log houses or *izbas*, had been repaired, and living in them was wonderful. That holiday in 1932 was deemed worthy of being immortalised by the chronicler, Sr. Jadwiga Górska, who was also the bursar and could put her hand to anything.

For the Sisters, who went there in turn, it provided a change of air, but also a change in occupation, because obviously, they were the assistants and sometimes farmhands.

Sr. Jadwiga also recorded the surprise visits they had that year. Fr. Jan Romanowicz the Salesian rector of Vilnius went there for a day with another priest, Fr. Stanisław Rokita, who was a student at the university at that time and who would later become provincial. There is a long testimony given by him to the Process. In it he highlights the human and Gospel characteristics of Mother Laura whom he considered to be a woman completely of God and totally self-giving like a mother.

She was kindness personified, good with everyone without exception. She never showed signs of fatigue even when conversations were prolonged so that one had the impression that she had nothing else to do. When one went to her, it seemed that she was waiting for whoever came to speak with her. Being with her

filled one's heart with comfort and joy which encouraged one to extend the conversation for as long as possible.

Those who observed Mother Laura attentively were easily convinced that hers was a supernatural life. Her eyes reflected the spiritual strength and the unspeakable inner happiness that the Lord gives to those who live united to him without forgetting him even for an instant.

Contrary to what many had said, Fr. Stanisław Rokita added, "Mother Laura spoke Polish so well that I was amazed". He said that it was true that she made some blunders, "but these errors only made the conversation more pleasant and attractive".¹³²

Among all those surprise visits there was also one from their great friend Monsignor Karol Lubianiec, who could hardly believe his eyes, on seeing how everything had changed on what had been one of his farms. He wanted two delegates from a certain, social committee to go there and experience it firsthand. Several other farms that were managed for the benefit of other poor people depended on this committee. These visitors also remained, "very surprised and very happy".

Deep, bright brush-strokes of suffering

Meanwhile, Mother Laura, having spent those lively summer months at Różanystok dedicating herself to the young vocations, resumed her pilgrimage as provincial.

In September she left Różanystok returning to Vilnius and then made a series of short visits to the various communities. She could often be found in Warsaw, where new projects of expansion were ongoing.

On October 5, a new event occurred in that world which was so vibrant with dedication without reserve: one that was called, 'death and burial'.

¹³² Intervista a don Stanisław Rokita, in Grassiano, op.cit., 118. Cf. anche *Summarium* 444 sgg.

The person summoned by the Angel of Death was a very young Polish Sister, Sr. Anna Ziarkówna, who was twenty-two years old and had been professed for two months. In previous years, illness had often appeared among the Sisters and the girls in the community, but then it had always receded. This time, instead, it was necessary to inaugurate the cemetery.

In September Sr. Maria Giebel, the community animator in Łódź had notified Mother Laura that something was wrong with Sr. Anna. It was a persistent and somewhat unusual toothache.

It certainly was unusual! It was not caused by decay, neuralgia or an abscess, but by a malignant tumour in her gums.

In hospital this was aggravated by typhoid with a high, insistent and destructive fever.

Sr. Cleofe Broggin, the novice formator, had confided that on the afternoon of the profession day, Sr. Anna, having to leave for her field of apostolate, had anticipated by some hours the deposition of her crown of roses on the altar in the chapel. She accompanied her to the chapel, and Sr. Anna had asked permission to offer herself once again. She asked to die rather than that even, “one fibre of her heart might not be for him”.

When she knew that death was near, Sr. Anna wanted to intone a hymn to Our Lady. The chronicle records that this young Sister died, “peacefully like an angel”, assisted by her sister, Sr. Janina.

In her biography, Domenica Grassiano writes that during one of her journeys at that time Mother Laura, “related to her companion that she had seen, ‘however not with her eyes’, a bright shining cross with a lily on it. In the centre there was written a name and a date but she was unable to read it”.

Had this been a supernatural inner vision? Had it been a telepathic intuition? What did it mean?
Did that lily, perhaps, represent Sr. Anna Ziarkówna?



That year an alarming premonition threatened to overshadow the always beautiful Advent season. There was something in the air; there was anxiety in their hearts.

The flu virus was rampant in the community and Mother Laura said, “Those of you who are not strong or robust should abstain from fasting. Let your fast be a spiritual commitment, one of patience, smiling charity, and gentle manners”.

Another aspect of that fast was, as in other years, going here and there begging for alms so that the orphans might have the joy of receiving a gift at Christmas. Sr. Helena Hermanowicz, having carried out this service for six years, said:

How many things I felt, how much effort I made; I knocked at many doors, I received many humiliations, but I carried out the obedience without complaint. When we returned in the evening, often frozen, often without having eaten lunch or taken anything throughout the day, we were so happy when Mother saw what we had brought. She was delighted with everything, and we, seeing her smile, forgot our tiredness and were ready to begin again the next day. In the end, Mother had many things to make into gift parcels for the children who numbered 300.¹³³

All the other Sisters, generously extending their work into the night, devoted themselves intensely to the preparations for Christmas. They sewed, mended, and created small decorations, so that everything might be beautiful, attractive, and pleasant.

Mother Laura then would ask one or another, “What do you think this Sister needs?”, because, Sr. Helena added, “she wanted each Sister also to receive an appropriate gift”.

That Christmas season was particularly remembered, because of the fear that would come later.

However, the house chronicle recalls the artistic Christmas crib arranged beside the altar.

Mother Laura had worked personally on its preparation with Sr. Bronia and Sr. Janina Kondratowicz. The Christmas tree had

¹³³ *Summarium* 266.

been prepared in the big hall and was surrounded by the tables for their meal together. The children were happy to sit at table with the Sisters. Everybody was cheerful because of the presence of our dear Mother Laura.

The warmth of a family was felt strongly that Christmas.

There was one incident, which, when read in retrospect, took on a particular significance. Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak recounts that in the evening:¹³⁴

Mother Laura distributed a holy picture to the Sisters depicting the Child Jesus holding a cross in his hands. One of those present exclaimed in surprise, ‘Why give us crosses on such a happy day, *Mateczka?*’ Then Mother replied serenely but also firmly, ‘Yes, let us keep all the crosses that should fall on our houses. May God spare others from suffering’.

Christmas passed and on December 29, Mother Laura became ill, and immediately it was serious.

The house chronicle of that day recorded the event, “She fell ill with influenza which rapidly developed into pneumonia. The whole house was in a state of anguish”.

On January 4, she was anointed with the Holy Oils. It should be remembered that in those days this sacrament was known as Extreme Unction, since it was given only at the point of death.

The Sisters prayed because they did not want to give up hope but their prayer was like a groan and they felt tremors of fear.

Toward evening the patient managed to make her breathless and laboured voice heard. “I am ready. I feel at peace.”

By January 8, the catastrophe seemed inevitable. The inflammation of her air passages had become more extensive. Mother Laura’s mouth was full of painful ulcers.¹³⁵ It was difficult for her to swallow an egg yolk dissolved in a little water, or a small cup of warm milk.

¹³⁴ *Copia Publica* 457; *Informatio* 129.

¹³⁵ Chronicle of Vilnius, January 8, “She developed a severe infection: inflammation and poisoning of the mouth, tongue, throat, larynx, oesophagus, and stomach”.

Sr. Zofia Sowińska and Sr. Bronia took turns in assisting her twenty-four hours a day. The other Sisters had to resign themselves to remain outside.

Days and weeks passed drop by drop: experienced, suffered, prayed, and offered minute by minute. Perhaps there was no pendulum there, but one seems to hear the seconds beating with the relentless ticking.

That day the chronicler wrote:

Our good Mother, nailed to her bed of pain in the midst of her great suffering, with eyes turned toward the crucifix, is admirable for her patience, for her complete abandonment to the holy will of God, transforming each groan, each breath, each pain into an act of love. Prayer has been redoubled day and night with perpetual adoration. Mortifications, even some extraordinary ones, are being carried out both by the Sisters and the girls. We are comforted by the cordial interest shown by the religious and civil authorities and by all the religious congregations of the city who pray and often ask for news. Everyone is participating in our anguish.

Twenty days later the same chronicle lamented thus, “As a result of the long, painful illness her heart is giving up. The danger is enormous. The catastrophe could be imminent and anguish rules throughout the house”.¹³⁶

Sr. Laura herself said, “I suffer as I have never suffered in my life. I seem to be stretched on the cross; but all for you, my God”.

The words of Dr. Kisiel were, “I have done everything possible; I can do no more. Only a miracle could save her from death”.¹³⁷



¹³⁶ 28 gennaio 1933.

¹³⁷ Cf. *Informatio* 130.

But why a catastrophe if death is the ultimate and total meeting with God? Undoubtedly the young Polish Sisters lived this truth profoundly, however, if *Mateczka* were to go, a huge chasm would have been opened before them.

Only ten years had passed since the doors of the FMA Institute had been opened to them. There had been a rapid growth, but precisely because of this, Mother Laura was needed. The work of the FMA in Poland was living a phase similar to that experienced by a person at the beginning of adolescence: rapid lengthening of arms, legs, and height; a rising dawn of new horizons, still poised uncertainly between light and shade.

There was need for a loving and adult guide who knew how to listen and to direct, one who could help them to understand themselves.



The atmosphere of anxious waiting was perceived even by the youngest children. It could be read in their eyes. They knew in their hearts that a mystery was taking place.

They prayed. More than once Sr. Helena Hermanowicz saw them prostrated on the ground, “with their little arms crossed”, almost leaning on each other for strength, asking for the grace. The priest who acted as chaplain also saw them. It brought him to tears and he was heard to exclaim, “It is impossible that God will not listen to them”.

A lay teacher who had a great devotion to Our Lady of Ostrobramska, had the idea of sending those children to the sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy, which had for many years been venerated at the Gate of Dawn, and who had given such consolation to her children, to the point of gladdening them with miraculous interventions.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ The Gate of Dawn has been alluded to earlier. Here a very short historical note can be added. When in 1387 the conversion of Lithuania to Catholicism was declared, devotion to the Virgin Mary spread rapidly. Some splendid churches were built in Vilnius, which even today are characteristic of the

They all went: Sisters, teachers, pupils, and friends. They participated in a Mass that was celebrated very early in the morning, before five o'clock. The director of the sanctuary said, "I am sure that your Mother will be cured. It is the first time in my life that I have seen young people praying with such fervour". Then he added, "This can change even God's plans".

A holy picture of Our Lady of Ostrobramska was placed under Mother Laura's pillow. Domenica Grassiano, in her biography,¹³⁹ wrote that Mother Laura saw Sr. Cleofe Broggin, who had to return to Różanystok, crying at her bedside. She said jokingly, "Sr. Cleofe is crying because she thinks that I will die without her. But don't worry; I won't die now: I haven't yet seen Our Lady".

What did she mean?

Domenica Grassiano also wrote that Mother Laura had confided earlier to the infirmarian, "Do you know that I dreamed of Our Lady of Ostrobramska. Send Sr. Jadwiga to take an offering to the Carmelites for my intentions".

What were her intentions at that time?

Sr. Domenica added:

She never said what had been revealed to her in the dream, but from that moment on she was sure that forty days before her death, she would see Our Lady with her own eyes. Therefore, she was waiting. She did not know when.

All of the above has been taken from oral testimonies. They can be interpreted as one wishes.



historical centre. Between 1503 and 1522 the city was surrounded by walls with nine gates and three towers. All of the gates were demolished toward the end of the XVIII century, with only the Gate of Dawn remaining. In an adjoining chapel, the already mentioned image of Our Lady of Ostrobramska, Mother of Divine Mercy is venerated.

¹³⁹ Grassiano, op.cit., 107.

During those terrible days at the end of January, two young Sisters, Helena Imperowicz and Anna Deręgowska, unbeknown to each other, had offered themselves to the Lord as victims. They wanted to give their own lives in exchange for that of *Mateczka*.

Sr. Helena became ill with pneumonia. This was written in the chronicle on February 8. Five days later the same chronicle recorded, “Sr. Anna Deręgowska was taken to hospital with an infection. She had influenza and a, “malignant skin infection had appeared on her face”.

A malignant skin infection! The fact was that Sr. Anna died of meningitis on February 22 at the age of twenty-nine. She had been an FMA for barely four years.

The chronicle again stated, “Everyone knew that Sr. Anna had offered her life to the good God to obtain the recovery of our Mother; all were certain that the victim had been accepted”.

Mother Laura had held great hopes for Sr. Anna. It was for this reason that she had placed her alongside the postulants, where they could learn from her example.

Sr. Helena, then, became worse. The pneumonia had developed complications. On March 5 the diagnosis was disastrous: by this time the inflammation had also spread to the pleura. A dry cough, fever and difficulty in breathing made every moment of life difficult for this young Sister. The house chronicle noted:

The patient suffered great pain and faced her approaching death with courage and acceptance, uniting her sufferings to those of Jesus and offering them for our Mother, for the whole congregation and for her family.

Sr. Helena died on March 9. Her earthly existence had lasted twenty-eight years.

On the same day the chronicle affirmed, “It was known that she, too, had offered her life for the recovery of our venerated superior”.



Sr. Zofia Sowińska had placed another bed beside that of Mother Laura. She had done so in order to assist *Mateczka* day and night. Then she too became ill with a high fever caused by a very bad influenza. She had to abandon her sentry post and was transferred to the infirmary.

Is it possible to imagine those days? What must the atmosphere in the house have been like?

During the night of February 22 Mother Laura dreamed of Sr. Anna Deręgowska. She was smiling and said, "Everything is over. I am well".

It was 2:30AM Sr. Anna had just died; Mother Laura, however, did not yet know it.¹⁴⁰

Later, when they told her everything, her sorrow was great. It is not known when this happened, perhaps some time later, when there was no longer any fear for her. Who knows?

Then, gradually, the illness loosened its grip. Mother Laura managed to breathe once more, and to live again.

At the end of March she reappeared and everyone smiled.

On March 26, the whole educating community returned to the sanctuary of Our Lady of Ostrobramska, this time to sing their 'Thank you'. There was a crowd of young people and adults, of laity and religious; everyone was there.

Instead, on April 21, which then was called the Superior's Feast and today has become the Feast of Gratitude, there was no crowd. There was only a special liturgy in the chapel, because Mother Laura could not and did not want to forget their mourning for the two young Sisters who had died in a total offering of themselves.

Then the chronicle continued to be very interested in and attentive to everything, almost as if it wanted to state, "You see, life has begun again".

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Grassiano, op.cit., 109.

Here is a short summary of the recorded facts:

- The month of May. Mother Laura personally prepared to show visually the little sacrifices to offer to Mary. In chapel, at the foot of her statue, which was always decorated with flowers, three paths were outlined, one each for the girls, the postulants and the Sisters. The paths would be followed, respectively with obedience, goodness, and sacrifice. Sacrifice fell to the Sisters, represented by many small crosses!

- The Week of the Orphan concluded with the Day of the Child organised by the Diocese. The orphans, helped by the Sisters, provided a snack of bread and salami for those who were less fortunate since they did not attend the school, and then they entertained them with a concert of songs and folk dances.

- Feast of Mary Help of Christians. The boarders took to the stage, presenting a play entitled Our Lady of the Woods. They showed that they were all 'leading ladies' so much so that they were invited to give one or even two repeat performances for a much wider audience and also for Monsignor Lubianiec.

- Summer holiday in Polepie. Mother Laura wrote to the archbishop of Vilnius:

There are more than 200 children here, without counting the adolescents and the people who are employed. Approximately 100 children are younger than seven. The distance of three kilometres to the church is too far for these little ones.

Therefore, she requested and obtained the permission for Mass to be celebrated in the, "chapel in the woods".



Foundations began again.

The first of these was unassuming, but very providential. In Rózanystok the Salesians needed some Sisters. Their boarding school was extensive and was growing in number, the boys were numerous; they had enormous appetites and when they ran about at breakneck speed or climbed trees or were involved in other active games their clothes were easily torn at the knees, elbows and so on.

It was not enough to have lay people of good will in the kitchen and sewing room; it was necessary to have someone who would dedicate themselves completely to those boys.

Already from the beginning Sr. Anna Walenga had committed herself to oversee all the household arrangements, but this was no longer sufficient. Mother Laura, therefore, promised an *ad hoc* community for the beginning of the scholastic year 1933-1934. The community animator would be Sr. Maria Figiel, who already had experience elsewhere for this type of venture.

Meanwhile a new apostolic plan began to be formed; a house not only for orphans but for, “orphans who were completely abandoned”, as was said by a witness at that time.¹⁴¹ That had always been a significant dream for Mother Laura; to have a beautiful, large, new house in the middle of the pine forest, for poor, unloved children.

The dream very quickly became a need, because the number of such children continued to rise, both in the mission of Różanystok and that in Vilnius. They felt the restrictions of their surroundings. Polepie was also overcrowded with children.

Providence arrived this time by way of the Society of Temperance and Work directed by Monsignor Lubianiec.

This society has already been mentioned in relation to the farm at Polepie, but it would be opportune here to expand further. Its founder had been Fr. Bronisław Markiewicz (1842-1912), who had known Don Bosco personally, having lived in Italy for seven years and who also became a Salesian. He had then returned to Poland in order to dedicate himself to poor and abandoned boys, to catechetics and to the apostolate among prisoners in his own country at Miejsce, in Galizia. In order to respond more directly to these many needs, in 1897 he founded the Society of Temperance and Work, which gave origin to the Congregation of St. Michael, a few years after his death.

¹⁴¹ *Summarium* 47.

Fr. Bronisław Markiewicz died in 1912 and was beatified in 2005 by Pope Benedict XVI.

Monsignor Karol Lubianiec, therefore, in agreement with the members of the Society¹⁴² was delighted to be able to finalise the already planned donation of the Sakiszki farm, including a wooded area of over ninety-eight hectares, situated about twenty kilometres from Vilnius.

The deed bore the date of November 19, 1929.

It was a beautiful area, which much later would be given another name, precisely that of Sr. Laura, being called Laurów.

It was necessary to adapt it and to build, and for this a great deal of money was required.

As always, the most trustworthy bank was that of Divine Providence. It generously opened its doors, but not without requiring the Sisters to submit to a new joyful and heavy sacrifice: that of begging for alms. Once again some of them experienced, “how the bread of others tastes of salt, and what a hard road it is to climb and descend other people’s stairways”.¹⁴³

The foundation stone was laid that summer, on July 2, 1933, in a clearing among the trees near a small lake. Sr. Zofia Sowińska and Sr. Jadwiga Górka supervised the work.

Researching some letters of the time, one can see that from that day on some frustrations began to be felt. They were of different types but always frustrations.

¹⁴² Under a photograph of Monsignor Karol Lubianiec published by Domenica Grassiano it is written, “One morning during the war a German platoon came to kill the monsignor. He received his executioners with great courtesy, offered them breakfast, asked to be allowed to spend a moment in church and then, calmly and serenely, he went to the place of execution. Neither the exact date of his death nor place of his burial, are known. The fact was related by eye witnesses. The news came from Henryk Gulbinowicz, Metropolitan Archbishop of Wrocław”.

¹⁴³ Dante, *Paradiso*, XVII 58-60.

As usual, the main one was the lack of funds on which the pace of the work depended.

For example, some months later, Mother Laura wrote to Sr.Zofia:

*We will go together to Sakiszki. The engineer cannot work only for us; he has to follow up on other jobs because he has to be able to live. But he is an honest man. And then we have seen what people can do. May God help us, and then gradually we will get there; I am certain of it. [...] What can that poor man do without money? Everything has to be bought, and when he asks Sr. Jadwiga, she replies 'there is no money'. Without that nothing can be done, you understand this too!*¹⁴⁴

Worries? Yes, but they were only superficial. Perhaps Mother Laura spent some sleepless nights when there was no money, but she never lost her profound happiness: the happiness of one who knows that she is held like a delicately feathered sparrow, in the life-giving hands of the Creator.

“Everything only for Jesus.”

“The Lord will think of us: we only have to be faithful to him”.

“The Lord will come to our aid; let us have faith; he will help us”.

There are many comments that accompany these phrases. Here is at least one of them, chosen at random.

Sr. Bronisława Rudzka said:

Mother Laura accepted every failure relying on the will of God and his love. I never saw her discouraged, depressed or distraught because she always trusted in God. It seems to me that, in her, the virtue of hope reached a heroic level.¹⁴⁵

Again in some letters:

- Yesterday I prayed and put 150 zloty into Sr. Maria [Mazzoli]'s hands so that she could send it to you, but she forgot. You will receive it on Tuesday. Tomorrow, Jesus, to whom I have prayed,

¹⁴⁴ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 65; a Sr. Zofia Sowińska (27 aprile 1934).

¹⁴⁵ *Summarium* 191,105, 81.

will send you more. If you knew how much the novices pray for us! Without doubt, dear Sofia, we will obtain everything we need, because in some the faith is very much alive.

- Let's hope that through the mercy of God, everything will be finished quickly there. May Our Lady grant us this grace just as Don Bosco must grant me the grace of paying all the debts, completing the house in Sakiszki, and buying everything needed for the children. If our Lady and Don Bosco do this they will put an end to our troubles.

- For the rest, let him do what he wants. For the past two years, because of one thing or another, I have enjoyed very little peace. Even when people believed that I was happy, I always had something to suffer. The Lord always knows what he is doing, therefore, may his holy will be done. The important thing is to know how to suffer well, but unfortunately, this is something I do not know how to do. Pray that I may learn to conform well to the will of God.¹⁴⁶

People were always put in first place. Especially poor, humble people like the workers: the woodcutters, excavators, and stonemasons:

When the men from Laurów arrive there, always give them something to eat. If it is breakfast time give them breakfast, if it is the lunch hour, give them lunch; if it is supper time, then supper. I say it all the time; why don't you do it? Today, you did not give Pyoter anything to eat. It made me sad. Don't do that again.

There are two kinds of charity expressed in this letter: the charity of offering a simple lunch, and the charity exercised directly here by Mother Laura, of giving a reprimand to the rather forgetful Sisters.¹⁴⁷



It is also pleasing to read another letter from that period, a time of dire straits because the building was like a voracious mouth

¹⁴⁶ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettere 59,60,61.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. lettera 109 a Sr. Helena Hermanowicz.

that devoured all the resources. It was necessary, therefore, to cut back a little on other aspects of daily life.

Therefore, Mother Laura wrote:

I won't be able to send you many eggs because Sr. Jadwiga also has her suitcase to carry. Therefore we will send about 500, and even more if we can. There are certainly great savings here; everything costs less. At this price, the children could have two eggs a day. Enough, let's come to us. This morning I was very disappointed with your letter. I was expecting news about the children, detailed news, and instead, you wrote two lines. [...]

I recommend to you, Sr. Sofia, see to the boys' shorts; who knows how worn they must be; and also the girls' petticoats; have them all washed. The aprons, too, are really ugly, but what can we do, it is necessary to have patience, and a lot of it... Everything as Jesus wishes. [...]

It is necessary that the assistants are enterprising, that they know how to speak properly and that they treat all the children really well; see to it that they have clean aprons with belts, that they have white collars and stockings that are not torn and that the girls have clean hair.

*Sr. Jadwiga will tell you the rest. Today I am in pain from a tooth that has been filled. This also is for the Lord. Everything is for our good.*¹⁴⁸

Mother Laura was a saint, but precisely because of this it gives pleasure to feel that she was one of us: a woman who spoke of aprons and holes in stockings, and what is worse, even painful teeth that will have to undergo the dentist's drill.

A little hospital

A group of young girls with no family arrived in January 1934, sent by the authorities in Warsaw.

They had regular medical certificates and should not have represented a threat to the young community.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. lettera 66.

Instead, they did. Some of them were carriers of a serious, transmittable infection, which may or may not have been congenital. The symptoms were shocking. It was probably syphilis.

Mother Laura was at a loss, because the illness could have been caused by the sad situations of life in which the young patients may have found themselves.

It was necessary to isolate them immediately. One of the newly arrived postulants, who was qualified, became their nurse. She was called Maria Pytel and very soon she would become one of the pillars of the Polish mission. Each day a woman doctor who was a specialist would go with her to the top floor of the house in Vilnius, where what was almost a little hospital had been set up.

Then four rooms, a corridor, and other adjoining rooms were made available in Sacred Heart House on Stefanska Street. This had cost another huge logistical sacrifice because a few months previously, on September 1, 1933,¹⁴⁹ more children had arrived at the request of the municipality of Vilnius. These had previously been housed in a children's hostel which had closed down. For this reason, the residence at Polepie had not been abandoned at the end of the summer holiday. In fact, it had been made more efficient, with some adaptations which, although not a complete solution, were at least appropriate and dignified.

It was a great effort, and a huge concern. There was the joy of apostolic service, but they needed help, especially more space.

In the letter written to Sr. Zofia Sowińska the immediacy and the expressiveness of all the anxiety and all the deep trust that Mother Laura lived hour by hour, can be found:

With regard to the children who are said to be cured, for heaven's sake, Sr. Sofia, don't put them with anyone until at least six months have passed. Believe me, after that blow, it is necessary to be very careful, and the assistants must have special instructions and be vigilant, very vigilant, so that there

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Grassiano, op.cit., 124.

is no repetition of those terrible things that might ruin us financially and in spirit.

*Lord, may our children recover quickly and well, and may this ugly illness never return during their lifetime. Poor little ones, may God bless them and make them saints.*¹⁵⁰

Mother Laura wrote, ‘children’, but she is referring to adolescent girls. The term, it is noted, is a type of diminutive often used in Tuscany to express maternal affection. For Mother Laura those young girls, whether guilty or not for their pitiful situation, were always dear ‘daughters’ and must, at all cost, be helped.

It took three years before all the enforced guests of the little hospital were cured. They were three years of anxiety and care. The postulant Maria Pytel had to wait three long years before beginning her novitiate in 1936.

How was she when she arrived there? She was worn out and exhausted. So much so, that the doctor, believing she was not suited to community life wanted to send her home to her family. Mother Laura, however, was immovable. “Healthy or sick, this daughter will remain with us.” So Maria Pytel remained, gradually recovering her strength.



In mid June Mother Laura was in Turin for the annual retreat certainly, but also to attend General Chapter X. The Delegate for the Polish communities was Sr. Maria Mazzoli.

“Dear Sr. Sofia...”

Why was it always, ‘Sr. Sofia’, meaning Sr. Zofia Sowińska?

The simple answer was because Sr. Zofia Sowińska always carefully kept all the letters received from Mother Laura, protecting them from a thousand misfortunes including unbearable war. How could letters addressed to other Sisters be cited if they no longer exist?

¹⁵⁰ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettere 63, 69.

Therefore, “Dear Sr. Sofia...”.

“We are at the Czechoslovakian border. We are fairly well. However, I have a cold. I feel as though I have a wound in my chest. But as God wishes.”¹⁵¹

Then the letters continued, first from Turin until mid July and then from Rome. They brought news, asked for information. It was like being at home while at the same time finding oneself at the heart of the Institute. They spoke about the general chapter, of the people who participated in it. She even wrote about the heat, “Sr.Bronia¹⁵² said one could no longer live and she was right, because even the Romans said the same thing”. Mother Laura also asked questions about how the Polish mission was going.

And you, Sr. Sofia, see to and provide for the needs of all, treat everyone really well. This is necessary for the good spirit of the community. Be very prudent and never speak words that might offend.

*Sofia my dear, above all become a saint; always be calm and smiling because this is how we must be to do some good. Always be kind and think well of everyone and see the gifts of God in all.*¹⁵³



Mother Laura returned ‘home’ to Poland, as she wrote in a letter on July 21, 1934 where a great surprise awaited her. The first time she went to visit the mission being carried out in the new house in the lush woodland of Sakiszki, she discovered that the name of the locality had been changed. It was now called Laurów, meaning, Laura’s Village.

The Sisters had wanted this for her. They had worked in secret, knocking on the doors of the Vilnius civil authorities in order to officially obtain this name.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. op.cit., lettera 70.

¹⁵² It is not known why Sr. Bronia Rudzka was in Italy with Mother Laura, but letter 75 names her in this way (Roma, 14 luglio 1934; Ibid. lettera 75).

¹⁵³ Ibid. lettere 72 e 73.

Stories

Here are some stories from those times.

Czesław's story

Czesław Nowak was born in Warsaw in 1930. When he arrived at the orphanage he was less than three years old. He had been abandoned and suffered from serious enteritis. He stuttered and appeared to have a learning disability.

He would later recount:

I was taken from Warsaw to Vilnius. The Sisters tried to place me with a group of the youngest orphans. In a short time, however, they realised that I could not live like or be with the other children. They later told me that they found me in a pitiful state. I did not yet know how to pronounce even one word clearly.

Mateczka took special care of me. She took me to a specialist who began to treat me but with little hope of a cure. *Mateczka*, however, did not give up. She removed me from the group of the other children and took care of me herself, and in time found me a teacher. In this way I was able to complete my primary schooling, albeit with much delay.

Mother Laura was actually criticised for this special care reserved for Czesław. It was even said that she gained financially from it. Who was it that had this foolish forked tongue? Fortunately, it is not known!

Czesław himself vigorously affirmed that she:

...loved all the little children, she was maternally interested in all of them, while taking special care of those who were slow learners or most in need.

She corrected in a gentle way never raising her voice. When a boy felt guilty, he would run to Mother Laura to confess and ask forgiveness, certain that she would excuse him to the assistant. I experienced this several times: *Mateczka* was our guardian angel.

Czesław is portrayed in a photograph in this book. He is blond, wearing a huge collar and is seated on a tricycle. Mother Laura gave him the tricycle because his little legs were too weak and could not move normally.

Many times in her letters to Sr. Zofia Sowińska, Mother Laura mentioned this child:

-I bought him a little coat.

-He has already finished three bottles of medicine. Let's hope that he can grow accustomed to being with the others.

-I recommend that he go for walks and eats well.

It was not because of an undue preference. It was the concern of a mother for a son who was most in need and alone.

The testimony then continued also regarding the time after the war.

Mother Laura sent me to the Salesian High school in Sokołów Podlaski. After a few months, however, when I went to visit her in Pogrzebień and asked insistently that she allow me to stay with her, she welcomed me with an open heart like a good mother; she enrolled me in the state high school in Racibórz and bought me a bicycle so I could travel each day from Pogrzebień; it is thanks to her, that I completed high school.

Then Czesław continued his studies; again, it was Mother Laura who arranged accommodation for him in Wrocław with a family who welcomed him, 'like a son'.

He began studying the science of soil management and crop production, but could not complete his studies because of his health and his difficulty in expressing himself.

"I have found work and I am happy."¹⁵⁴

There is still something very thought provoking to record about him. It was August 15, 1951 and Czesław was in Pogrzebień visiting Mother Laura. At the moment of parting she asked:

-When will you return to visit me?

-In September, or perhaps in October, when I have finished attending to matters concerning my apprenticeship.

He was referring to matters which would lead to his promotion as the person in charge of a warehouse. Mother Laura, however,

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Grassiano, op.cit., 136.

had a different agenda, so much so that she replied in this way, “No. You will come to me in two weeks time”.

Strangely enough, two weeks later Czesław was there in Pogrzebień, for Mother Laura’s funeral.

“*Mateczka* had the gift of foresight”, he said. Was that a simple prediction or a prophesy? One must decide personally.

Czesław further added:

In my opinion, Mother Laura could see through you. For example, she could understand immediately if one was good or bad, if one had been to confession or still had sins on one’s conscience. I speak from experience.¹⁵⁵

Anastazja

Another story is sadly that of Anastazja Trochimowicz. She had not been admitted to perpetual profession, and she rebelled. Her complaint went as far as the Vatican, to the Congregation of Religious. She claimed that she had not been understood, she was not taken care of during an illness, and she was not accompanied during her formation! Is that enough?

Mother Laura was questioned, and reluctantly had to make known the deviations of that Sister, who really was not made for a life of self-giving.

Regarding the episode there is a letter dating back four years that speaks volumes:

*... the train tickets for Sr. Anastasia, who I wish should go to Zakopane, to see if she can regain her health and then be able to work. God willing! See that she has everything she needs and that she travels in second class [at that time there was also third and fourth class] and that she will be accompanied as far as Grodno by... She will be met there....*¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Cf. *Summarium* 300.

¹⁵⁶ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 38.

Matylda and Cecylia

Two other young Sisters, instead, dreamed of leaving for the missions.

One was Matylda Sikorska who at that time belonged to the community in Mysłówice. During one of Mother Laura's visits, she presented her with a letter. Mother Laura read it and remained deep in thought.

The letter came from Turin and was already a reply. Sr. Matylda with great simplicity, and in a burst of fervour, had actually written directly to Mother Vaschetti asking her to send her, perhaps, to Africa. She had not said anything to Mother Laura, certainly not to bypass her, but just like that, without making an issue of it.

Mother Luisa had replied, "If your provincial is in agreement".

Mother Laura's hand trembled slightly. Her mind turned to the recent work in Mysłówice. If Sr. Matylda were to leave, the school would collapse. She was the column that supported it.

She gently said, "Truthfully, I have no-one to replace you, but if the Lord wants you as a missionary, so be it," and immediately she planned a way to prepare a replacement.

Sr. Matylda left for Italy a few months later for her immediate preparation. While there, however, she became seriously ill, even glimpsing death. They saved her, but the doctor said: no Africa or exotic climates; especially, nowhere hot.

Thus Sr. Matylda returned to Poland.

The other was Sr. Cecylia Ginalska. She had made her first profession and was awaited in the new work at Laurów as a primary teacher. However, she hoped to be sent to a mission further afield.

Mother Laura asked her to wait, because they really needed her.

Sr. Cecylia accepted serenely, with all the joy that comes from an inner availability.

In the winter, she was suddenly struck down with a raging pneumonia and on February 2, 1935 she left to be a missionary in heaven, like St. Therese of Lisieux.

Two days later, in a letter to the superior general, Mother Laura wrote:

*I was sure that Mother Mazzarello would have given us this grace, but it is clear that, for the good of this holy soul she wanted to gather her to herself. She was an angel, and died like one. She was a daughter on whom one could depend: balanced, cheerful, enterprising, educated. I cannot hide that everyone is feeling this loss. We have had an angel in our midst.*¹⁵⁷

Kazimierz Pawiński

There was another orphan, Kazimierz Pawiński, who was born in Warsaw in 1930 and was brought to Laurów seven years later.

In his account he said, “I remember Mother Laura as unalterably kind to us; I remember her as a holy person, like the best of mothers!” With her, the orphans found themselves surrounded by boundless love. “She was compassionate, and very patient. She always gave us a sweet smile, a kind word, a small gift, a slice of bread.”

Kazimierz recalled an incident, small in itself, but as rich in profound values as to remain impressed in his life.

A little boy, skating on the ice fell and fainted. Kazimierz went to inform Mother Laura. In the evening after everything had settled down, *Mateczka* called him and he did not know why. The reason was a fine delicacy, one that was respectful of the person, even when he was small and marginalised, even when he was only an abandoned orphan. “Kazimierz, I asked you to come because I wanted to thank you for informing me that one of our little brothers had fallen.” Kazimierz went away with tears in his eyes.¹⁵⁸

Kazimierz later saw Mother Laura when she was near death:

¹⁵⁷ *Summarium* 395.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. *Copia Publica* 2048.

She was already seriously ill, but she welcomed me with open arms; she spoke to me several times and asked me to visit her again. I always thought of her as my dearest mother.

He added with a certain pride:

When she died, I went immediately to Pogrzebień and being a carpenter, I was fortunate enough to contribute to the making of her coffin so that it would be well done. Then, together with my colleagues, her past-pupils, I carried the coffin on my shoulders.

Zofia Sowińska: a heart of gold in a volcano

By autumn of 1934, the new house in Laurów was ready to open its doors. Sr. Zofia Sowińska, who knew that house brick by brick, was entrusted with the direction of the work. She had spared none of her energy to bring it into being, animated as she was by apostolic love for all those young people whom she was called to accompany.

Who was Sr. Zofia Sowińska? She is spoken of often throughout this book, therefore, a brief mention will not be amiss.

The story of her vocation and formation in Nizza Monferrato is already known. Something of her personality as it appears from her relationship with Mother Laura will be examined, beginning from a curt response that Sr. Zofia one day gave to a Salesian rector.

It happened that a girl, a danger to the others and also a thief, had made a fuss about the measures taken toward her by the Sisters. The rector had seen fit to intervene, it is not recorded in what way. This had more than a little irritated Sr. Zofia. She told him to, “go and play his own violin”, using a Polish expression that meant loud and clear, “...mind your own business”.

Then, however, Sr. Zofia was sorry and confessed her serious failure to *Mateczka* in a letter, because she was not there.

Here was Mother Laura’s reply:

I received your letter with the unpleasant news and I am sorry for you, my poor daughter, that you are not happy. Let us grasp the

cross that God gives us and kiss it reverently: it is the price of his blood and the key that opens heaven for us.

It was wrong of you to tell the rector to play his own violin. We must be careful about the words we say. Find some way to approach him and, if it is opportune, ask his pardon. He knows the girls, and he is right to say they are bolszewickie [from the diaspora, without a family to care for them] because that is what they really are.

Then she gave some suggestions for the smooth running of everything: to accompany the girls to school so that they are not alone on the streets, at the mercy of devious people; to provide for Czyrmanowska, and also for Marta, so that they feel at ease and can be formed well.

“However, dear Sofia don’t get annoyed; do everything calmly, be always serene and smiling. Take an egg and some wine every day; I recommend this with all my heart.”¹⁵⁹

Sr. Zofia Sowińska, however, while her dedication to her neighbour was intense, completely enlivened by love, often found it difficult to smile. Mother Laura urged:

You are always in my thoughts, because I can see that your health is growing worse and the headaches are certainly caused by something internal. You contribute strongly to this deterioration by a life of overwork, going to bed late and then forcing yourself to get up! I understand that this causes you suffering in the morning and, believe me, I find myself between a rock and a hard place, because I feel I must get up to go to chapel; my heart suffers because I can see that you are not able to do so. I would like to say to you: Sofia, sleep in the morning, because Jesus is happy. But if I say this to you, you are offended; and therefore, I suffer, keep quiet, and don’t know what to do.

I would like you to understand that if I say something to you, I say it for your good and not (as you think) to distance myself from you [...]; and you become restless and irritated.

¹⁵⁹ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 48.

I understand, however, that this state of affairs is caused by the illness you have and in order to feel better and stay calmer, you must eat and sleep regularly, and be convinced that we live among creatures who give what they possibly can and if today they make a mistake, tomorrow it is we who will be mistaken, and that we will never correct people by being troubled and by treating them badly.

*Work on yourself, my dear Sofia, work for the love of God and for your soul which cost the blood of our blessed Jesus.*¹⁶⁰

This and other letters which touched on the same topics were preserved as a treasure by Sr. Zofia, who understood and appreciated them and made of them her spiritual program. It is not possible to report them all here. It might be good, however, to seek them out and read them in serene meditation.



So it was that in autumn 1934, Sr. Zofia Sowińska reluctantly accepted the task of animating the new community in Laurów. In order to prevent her from rushing in headlong and then getting irritated because of exhaustion, Mother Laura, outlined a programme for her, in fact, a schedule:

*In the morning until 9 o'clock go around the house and see what the Sisters need. Then from nine until twelve work on the accounts, and on the reorganisation of all your papers. At 12 o'clock go and see what the children, the teachers, and the postulants have to eat. Take a walk around to see if everything is in place, then go to lunch. After the visit to the Blessed Sacrament return to your work until 3:30PM. Then go into the garden for a while, take another walk and at 4:30PM make yourself available to the Sisters and postulants, but in the shade, in the woods near the house, so that while you are talking, you can see everything that happens. After supper give the Good Night. [...] Courage; Jesus is with us and will see that everything will go well".*¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. lettera 52.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. lettera 83. Anno 1935.

Sr. Zofia needed courage, because she knew well the explosive tendencies of her character that was so inclined to demand and react, but that was good and deeply founded on faith and on her decision to give herself completely. Mother Laura followed her with confidence in her profound qualities; she did not leave her alone and continuously opened for her horizons of light.

Dynamics of everyday life

Study was important in Poland. In looking around Mother Laura saw children, and young women and thought about their future. It was necessary to prepare them to secure an honest employment in a Christian way so that society could be glad of their presence.

For this, prepared educators were required.

Mother Laura, despite the perennial financial crisis, knew how to spend money. She spent in order to have many young Sisters attend specialised courses. Thus, through the effort of all, emerged teachers for the primary schools, teachers of sewing and dressmaking, people capable of teaching drama, singing, gymnastics or drawing and design and so on. Some even began to attend university courses.

A patrimony of knowledge was gradually being formed.

Those communities, however, were not only centres for studious people; they were workshops where one worked hard. Daily life was the teacher of many things, enlightened by mutual support, and in the first place by the words and presence of *Mateczka*.

One testimony reads:

She knew how to inspire the Sisters with such zeal as to awaken in them the strength to devote themselves unsparingly to generous care. She tirelessly taught everyone together and each one in particular, without ever skimping on her precious advice. She took a lively interest in everything. Under her watchful and wise direction

all the works, although started in difficult situations, developed favourably.¹⁶²

There were other important visits.

First, Archbishop Romuald Jałbrzykowski of Vilnius arrived. He was making a pastoral visit to a nearby parish and wanted to impart his blessing on Laurów. He had also heard that the people of the neighbourhood received from that house the great gift of an unimaginable sacramental life thanks especially to the Salesian, Fr. Józef Pach who acted as chaplain. On Holy Thursday approximately 500 adults received Jesus in the Eucharist.

Fr. Pach recounted that an elderly man had arrived in Laurów having travelled sixteen kilometres on foot. He first met a Sister and asked her for help. He would have liked to go to confession, but did not have the courage to do so because he had not received the sacraments for more than twenty years. Then, after finally succeeding in being reconciled with the Lord, he went away happy.

The archbishop found himself surrounded by a crowd of children who sang, recited, performed dances, and offered roses. Roses? There, in that area?

Yes, and even flourishing vegetables, all the work of a woman called Laura Meozzi who had a gift for gardening.

Indeed, Mother Laura, defying the scepticism of the local people, had wanted those crops, and she had succeeded.

The image of the archbishop's secretary standing in awe before the cauliflower and then again in front of the promising orchard, is an amusing one.

Then, in September 1936, there was the joy and honour of welcoming the Cardinal of Poland, Augustus Hlond, who had always been a great friend of the Sisters.

¹⁶² Dudziak, in *Copia Publica* 464.

He arrived in Vilnius in the heart of the night, but at the station, together with the Salesians who would be his hosts, he found a grateful and rejoicing Mother Laura and some lively girls.

Later, at Laurów, he admired everything, from the air in the forest to the bright smiles of different people.

The children sang, the birds formed a choir, and everyone in festive clothes hastened to tell him how happy they were with that Salesian life that bustled around them. Each person and family was at ease there, with great joy in their hearts, because everything was simple and human, even if everything pointed to heaven.

Then the cardinal met the postulants, who had been sent to Laurów, also because the provincial house was to be transferred there.

To these young people he gave the warmth of his fatherliness, which really had the flavour of that of Don Bosco.

Before leaving, the cardinal warmly recommended to Mother Laura that a new house, already planned, should be opened in Poznań, in the rural centre of Komorniki. The new foundation very quickly became a reality: with a kindergarten, technical courses, oratory, and parish collaboration.

A letter from Mother Laura to the Superior General, Mother Luisa Vaschetti, dated July 7, 1936, said, among other things:

I hope you have recently received a request for the opening of a new house in Poznań. This house in Komorniki is at a similar distance from Poznań as Sassi is from Turin. The Sisters there will do much good [...] Cardinal Hlond greatly desires to have the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians there in his territory. We await a definitive response as soon as possible, because they would like us to commence at the beginning of August.



A much more intimate visit for everyone, that of the General Councillor, Mother Teresa Pentore took place during the summer of 1937. This time Mother Laura did not go to the station.

Why? Because disaster had struck.

During the summer holidays, groups of children had arrived in Laurów from Vilnius and Warsaw for summer camp. The whole landscape teemed with vitality. In the woods, in the courtyards of the house, on the shore of the lake and the banks of the river there was movement, laughter, and the shouting of dozens of joyful little friends. The assistants had all their antennae raised to prevent incidents great or small. They organised games and outings, gathered blueberries, and other forest fruit. They guided the prayers, taught songs, undertook catechetics, but their eyes had to be everywhere.

All those eyes were not enough. In a moment when there was no lifeguard, a little boy escaped from the attention of the assistant. He went into the river Wilia¹⁶³ and took about fifteen steps. Sr. Emilia Chodziutko called out to him, but just at that moment an unexpected whirlpool engulfed the boy.

Sr. Emilia sprang to her feet and jumped into the water just as she was. She reached the drowning victim, but he grasped her clothing in a way that prevented any movement on her part.¹⁶⁴

They died together.

It took three hours to retrieve their bodies.

Sr. Zofia Sowińska was not there that day and Mother Laura was in Vilnius for a dental appointment. When they returned to Laurów in response to a telephone call they found desolation not only in the house but also in the whole district.

Mother Laura was stricken by a strong asthma attack and because of this she was not able to go to meet the visiting councillor at Zebrzydowice, where the border station was situated.

¹⁶³ This river (*Wilia* in Polish, *Wilija* according to another pronunciation, *Neris* in Lithuanian) is a tributary of the Nemunas (or Niemen). Cf. Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani, vol. XXI, alla voce “Lituania /Idrografia”.

¹⁶⁴ Sr. Emilia Chodziutko was born in 1910 and made her profession in 1931. She died on June 10, 1937.

The Provincial Vicar, Sr. Maria Mazzoli went in her place and it was she who accompanied their guest, beginning from Myslowice and then heading north.

When they reached Laurów, Mother Laura had recovered.



That visit, which began after such an overwhelming event, took place in an atmosphere of great and painful recollection. However, this did not impede, but in a certain sense encouraged, a profound encounter between the visitor and all the Sisters in Poland, who were so full of Salesian enthusiasm for total self-giving to children, young people and the needy.

Mother Teresa, despite the language barrier, which, after all, was not so impenetrable because words are only one aspect of all the expressive potential of each person, was full of admiration for what had been brought to life, what they were doing, and how they lived there. In her talks and in her final report she continually emphasised these sentiments, highlighting particularly, “the great spirit of sacrifice of the dear Sisters, and especially the life of poverty found in every house”.¹⁶⁵

Mother Teresa also said to Cardinal Hlond, “I find great poverty and much good spirit. I admire the Sisters. They are all happy; I have not heard any complaint about the hardships”. The cardinal replied, “That is good. Where poverty reigns there is good spirit. Poverty preserves vocations”.¹⁶⁶

One memoir in particular speaks of how Mother Teresa never forgot, “the joy that she saw on the faces of those Sisters who lacked even what was necessary”.

¹⁶⁵ *Informatio* 145.

¹⁶⁶ Sonaglia, Maria, *Il faggio sul colle* 284, in *Informatio* 146.

Geographical expansion

Work was important in Poland. The Polish people worked hard with all their energy, committed to advancement in seeking the common good. The young boys and girls, who were always increasing in number, wanted to improve their cultural preparation, so much so that it was felt necessary to create new courses of study.

The Salesians in Sokołów Podlaski recommended the situation to Mother Laura. They wanted to expand their secondary school, by adding a section for girls.

The Sisters had already been present in Sokołów Podlaski, since January 7, 1930. They were there as guardian angels. The three Sisters were committed to assisting the numerous girls who worked in the kitchen, sewing room and laundry. They were committed to assisting, certainly, but without ever sparing themselves. They worked hard and smiled happily, in this way offering the first and irreplaceable catechetical lesson, not only to the girls, but also to all those who lived around them.

These Sisters were Sr. Maria Fiegel, Sr. Anna Ścisłowska and Sr. Julia Janus. It was the rector who called them angels.

Before sending them, Mother Laura had wanted a guarantee: that they would be able to open a sewing class for the girls of the area and would have, “a small place for the oratory and for gathering the girls”¹⁶⁷.

Therefore, in autumn 1938 it happened that the three Sisters in that community almost doubled in number. They became five, with the addition of two new graduates, who would teach in the girls’ section of the school.

As with any birth, this too brought joy.

Then it was the turn of Grabów, a small centre that was situated between Łódź and Mysłowice. It was the Provincial, Fr. Tomasz Kopa, who had requested it two years previously, but

¹⁶⁷ Sokołów Podlaski is a medium-sized city, and is situated in the eastern part of the central zone. The request came at the end of 1929. The above response is found in the Łódź house chronicle in October 1930.

then, it is not known why, the idea had been dropped, with the result that Mother Laura had not even mentioned it to Mother Teresa Pentore.

Later, however, the initiative had matured, so much so that Fr.Kopa, bypassing Mother Laura, had written directly to the superior general. There was a moment of confusion, then everything became clear.

Sr. Laura wrote to mother general on May 25, 1938:

I refer to the letter from Fr. Tomasz Kopa. I would have liked to give the news before the event was accomplished, but Fr. Kopa, who had the matter in hand, said nothing until everything had been arranged with the civil and ecclesiastical authorities and we could no longer withdraw. Here in Poland, the Salesians are very well known and everyone is certain that whatever they do, we will do the same, and those who know the Salesians refer directly to them.

Fr. Kopa spoke to me about this opening two years ago and then, since it all went quiet, I believed that everything was finished. [...] Now, when the authorities concerned returned to the subject, Fr. Kopa immediately took the bull by the horns, especially since other institutions had set their sights on this goal because it is in a very healthy location where much good can be done for the young people. The authorities prefer us to others, and arranged the contract with Fr. Kopa! Cardinal Hlond immediately gave his verdict, and is very happy that we will be coming to his diocese. According to the finalised arrangements, I have to send the Sisters at the end of this month given that they have to prepare the classrooms for the vocational school and organise the house!¹⁶⁸

A nice mess, but a 'beautiful' one. The Sisters were esteemed and wanted; they were only afraid of letting the opportunity slip away.

Naturally, Mother Vaschetti understood, and so the house was opened and was able to offer joy and wisdom to many young people, beginning from the scholastic year 1938-1939.

What about Fr. Kopa? He was a marvellous Salesian with a missionary heart. He had prepared for the priesthood in Italy and remained there, completely devoted to an intense apostolate, until

¹⁶⁸ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 226.

1925. Later, in Poland, he was the rector in Oświęcim and Warsaw, after which he was nominated as provincial. When Mother Laura wrote about him, he had scarcely five more months to live; in fact the Lord called him on October 11, 1938 at fifty years of age.

Another interesting fact about the first Sisters in that community can be found in Domenica Grassiano's biography:

There, these Sisters found much better living conditions than those in Vilnius, Różanystok, or Laurów, and not having boarders, the work was less heavy, and yet, they all mourned for that terrible, yet beloved north.¹⁶⁹

One of them, a certain Janina, then said, "I cried because of homesickness. Up there we worked day and night, there was hardly any heating, the food was very measured and of poor quality, here instead..."

She missed *Mateczka* as did the others.



The *Informatio* stated that Mother Laura had entrusted the whole undertaking in Grabów to the Lord, but in particular to the Lord as he had revealed himself to Sr. Faustina Kowalska, the visionary who Pope John Paul II would later proclaim a saint on that as yet far distant April 30, 2000, and who at that time lived in Vilnius.

Mother Laura did not approach the visionary Faustina, but was able to meet her spiritual director, Fr. Michal Sopoćko, a professor of theology. She also invited him to speak to the Sisters and it was a blessing.

Life-giving meditation on the mercy of the Lord Jesus was always a source of strength and apostolic zeal for Mother Laura. She spoke of it to her Sisters on every occasion, whether in meetings or in letters.

¹⁶⁹ Grassiano, op.cit., pag. 147.

She wanted to have a replica of the painting and gave the task to the very talented Sr. Bronia.

There are many testimonies in the *Summarium* on the love that the Sisters had for this picture, which reminded them of the infinite goodness of the Lord and urged them to unconditional and joyful self-giving. During the war, it was repeatedly saved from destruction. The thought of the passion of Jesus, deeply lived and transmitted by Mother Laura, helped all those Sisters to transform their sufferings, hardships, and persecutions into faith and love.

“*Jezù ufam Tobie*” [Jesus, I trust in you]. This was always and for everyone, the invocation that led to the joy of loving abandonment, multiplying strengths, and vital energies.

A time of light before descending into darkness

At the beginning of October in the year 1937, the centre of the pre-province was transferred to Laurów.

Life was good there; it was poor, but good. Even Mother Laura almost forgot her annoying asthma.

She was surrounded by many people with great good will and she knew how to move them to action. Therefore, the little children gathered twigs and brushwood in the forest with which to light the fire. The children, with the Sisters, made a chain to carry the logs to the kitchen and stacked them there, and then gathered mushrooms and wild strawberries or carried water.

It was all a lesson; it was an expansive and contagious joy.

The vegetable garden thrived; they could even take fresh vegetables to the community in Vilnius.

It was good land, but it required much attention and hard work. The postulant Jadwiga Kung who worked there full-time knew all about this. The combination of the climate and the physical effort against the background of scarcely filled plates in the dining-room meant that this poor Jadwiga was always hungry. She suffered from certain stomach cramps and this threatened her vocation.

Jadwiga presented herself to Mother Laura and asked to go to visit her family. Did she want to go home where she would have enough to eat? Perhaps, yes, but Mother Laura understood that there was something else underlying: perhaps Jadwiga would not return.

“Yes”, she told her, “but please wait for a few days because at the moment I have no money”. Seeing her there before her, Mother Laura had understood.

She sent her immediately to have a snack and gave instructions to the server that she should have more at lunch and supper.

After two or three days, she called her back. “Here is the money for your journey, Jadwiga.”

“No, Mother, I am not going. Do you know? I was thinking about not coming back.”

“Yes, Jadwiga, I understood. Now, see what you want to do; give your answer to the Lord”.

Jadwiga replied with a ‘yes’ that would never waver again.¹⁷⁰

Mother Laura enjoyed good health while in Laurów, but she was seldom there. By this time there were nine houses and the works had multiplied. In her capacity as Provincial she reached them one by one, up and down, from right to left, to all points of the compass. She continued to be the community animator of Laurów, but her vicar, Sr. Zofia Sowińska, helped her a great deal, with intelligence, dedication, and absolutely gratuitous love.

Mother Laura’s visits were like a dewfall. Even the children and the girls, “waited impatiently for her”.

Having to give an obedience, she would say, “Do me this favour; I need your help”.

“She did everything in a cheerful way and with wisdom.” “She also knew how to be decisive and demanding”, especially when she saw the worm of grumbling about absent people infiltrating the

¹⁷⁰ Cf. *Summarium* 480.

conversation. She would interrupt them, saying, “For heaven sake, do not grumble”.

“She did everything she demanded of the Sisters to a heroic degree.”¹⁷¹

By now it was almost the threshold of 1939, an ill-fated year in the history of the world.

One can read in the *Informatio*:

Though in the grip of great poverty, everything still looked promising. Over the years the number of works and houses had grown. The people trusted the Sisters; hundreds of children and young people profited from the work of the FMA in the educational, religious or cultural field, enjoying their teaching, learning a profession to become as Don Bosco wanted: good Christians and honest citizens.

They not only worked in favour of children. Urged on by the love of Christ the Sisters did their utmost also in the social field for adults, setting up soup kitchens for the unemployed. The hope of opening new houses grew.¹⁷²

At this point, it might not be a bad idea to pick up an ‘apostolic abacus’. It can be found, like a hi-tech calculator, in the 1939 general directory of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. These were the statistics: 9 houses opened, 101 professed Sisters (of whom 52 were in temporary profession), 16 novices.

A splendid synthesis, but the fiery, ravenous monster of war, with its talons unsheathed, was about to pounce.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Ibid. 46, 79.

¹⁷² *Informatio* 149.

Chapter Four

THE LIFE-EATING MONSTER

The beginnings of the great destruction

September 1, 1939: a date steeped in pain. All the flint in the world would not be sufficient to carve it on history's calendar. Poland was invaded by Hitler's army. A nameless war exploded in the heart of the world.

Proudly adorned by a Swastika, death began to march in hob-nailed boots over the innocent victims of the Danzig Corridor. The hands of a monstrous clock moved like this:

- 04:26: precision bombing destroyed a warehouse full of fuses that the Poles had prepared to demolish the bridge over the Vistula in order to prevent the entry of the enemy troops. The bridge was saved and the entry of the Nazis assured;

- 04:40: 1,200 people died in the city of Wieluń as a result of the bombing; the vast destruction could not be counted;

- 04:45: the Germans opened fire from the sea on the Westerplatte Peninsula. At that moment, the tragedy was initiated which would extend, with domino effect, to such vast areas as to merit the title, World War, even more than that which had preceded it twenty-five years earlier.

As early as August 25 the German battleship Schleswig-Holstein was there in the waters off Gdansk, on 'a courtesy visit' to the city. Instead, its lynx-like eyes and all its sensitive antennae were directed toward the ancient fortress that served as an ammunition store. It was only waiting for zero hour.

On September 17, it was the Soviet Union's turn. Poland found itself locked in a vice from which it would emerge only with unspeakable wounds.

Great Britain and France had also entered the war on September 3, in defence of the Polish territory. In Berlin there was talk of a 'lightning war', instead it was the eve of a never-ending tragedy that would extend to other peoples and continents.



In Laurów, as in all parts of the country, the news of the war crackled from the radio.

The children at the summer camp in Vilnius returned immediately to their homes. The others, orphans between three and fourteen years of age, sent there by the authorities in Warsaw, remained.

There were immediately two victims among the Sisters: Sr. Aniela Szczercińska and Sr. Wanda Krasowska who had gone to Warsaw for the pressing needs of the orphanage which was about to sink into the depths of hunger.

During previous days, at the first signs of war, the market for basic necessities entered into crisis. As always happens in these cases, there was no lack of cunning people who had been buying large quantities of goods in order to sell them on the black market. Ration cards had been distributed, but their allocation was not enough for all the children. The two Sisters had gone to knock on the door of the central administration. They would never again return to Laurów.

All communication was disrupted. For a long time no-one knew anything about them. Every day, like the merciful father in the Gospel, Mother Laura went out on the terrace, rosary in hand, and with great anxiety in her heart. She scanned the street as far as the eye could see, but never saw those Sisters.

Reading the house chronicle in Sokołów Podlaski some of the events surrounding that tragedy became clear. The Salesian, Fr. Julian Zawadzki had indirectly assisted at this event.

The train on which the Sisters were travelling was strafed by waves of machine-gun fire, just beyond the outskirts of Warsaw. Fr. Julian was not far away. He ran there immediately, found several dead among the twisted metal, and he learned that among the wounded there were also two Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. They were still alive but in a desperate condition; one had been hit severely on the head and the other had a mangled arm and side.

Fr. Julian followed them as far as the Minsk Mazowiecki Hospital. He could only bless the body of one; from the other he was able to receive her last words, which were an invocation to the Lord Jesus. A nurse handed him their documents and two or three other small objects.

He managed to make contact with the community in Laurów only a month later through the Sisters in Różanystok.

It is not difficult to imagine how Mother Laura felt. Those were two of the youngest Sisters. A short time before, during the summer when the immanent outbreak of war could already be foreseen, she had lost another elderly Sister, who had been one of her first companions in that great missionary adventure. She was Sr. Anna Walenga, a very brave woman, who had endured hardship and toil to the point of wearing out all her strength on her Polish soil for the kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

This same Sister, clearly remembering another war, that of 1914-1918, which she had lived through in Italy, had offered her life to the Lord. It can be read in the *Informatio*¹⁷³, “on the advice of her confessor” she had asked permission from her community animator. Mother Laura, “far from supposing what seriousness the Sister attached to her request, since she was so afraid of death, had smilingly said yes”.

¹⁷³ Ibid. 152.

At that time, on the monthly retreat day, the FMA used to pray thus, "For the one among us who will be the first to die: Our Father...". On the evening of July 12, while leaving chapel Sr. Anna had said, "that prayer today was for me". The next day, as she crossed the yard carrying a blanket to spread in the sun, she fell to the ground stricken with a cerebral haemorrhage. She died shortly after in the arms of her *Mateczka*.



Some other news from those days concerned the community in Sokołów Podlaski. The house chronicle recorded:

September 1. We experienced a very frightening moment when we heard the wail of the siren announcing that war had broken out between Germans and Poles. Everyone is working feverishly to finish the shelter. The German bombers are constantly circling over the city.

September 4. The first bombing. The elementary school building was destroyed. We were in the dining room. It seemed as if the house would fall on our heads. We are ready to die if the Lord wills it.

On September 8, the evacuation began. Like a large part of the population, the Sisters moved away from the city on a horse-drawn wagon. The line of refugees was very long and miserable, and repeatedly strafed from above.

The Sisters spilled out into a potato field, abandoning the wagon and the few things they had brought with them. At a certain point, they found the road blocked by German troops who were advancing in armoured cars. They had to turn around and go back to the city. When they finally got there, exhausted and consumed by anxiety, they discovered the house was no longer theirs. It had been seized by the German command and was already being turned into a military hospital.

The Sisters were immediately 'employed' as laundry staff.



In the meantime, Mother Laura was cut off. She could not find out what was happening in the various communities of the province.

Those of the centre and south seemed to have become far away, as if they belonged to another world from which she received no news. The houses were occupied by the Nazis who, in their 'goodness', had limited themselves to evicting the Sisters, without demanding that they pay with their lives or imprisonment. They had to wander about, searching for shelter and work among friends and family.

However, there had been a small miracle. Sr. Matylda Sikorska had managed to form a small community alongside the Salesians in Krakow, in the south of the country.

Mother Laura knew nothing of this. She could only pray and she did this even during the night, getting up at 1AM. As the new day was beginning, she would prostrate herself before the image of the Merciful Jesus which, as a precaution, she had somehow hidden in her own room.



The whole area of Vilnius, including Laurów, although on Lithuanian soil, had belonged to Poland since February 1922, following its annexation.

In August 1939, the notorious Non-Aggression Pact between Russia and Germany was signed in Moscow. It led almost immediately to the division of Poland and the subjection of the three Baltic republics of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia to Soviet power. The Vilnius region was returned to Lithuania, which however, felt the heavy foot of the Soviet dominator on its neck. The pact bore the names of the two foreign ministers, the Russian Molotov and the German Ribbentrop as well as those of Hitler and Stalin who pretended mutual availability, but, in reality, had a murderous intent for the populations concerned.

Then history exploded on that terrible September 1, as has already been recorded. On September 19 Vilnius also was conquered and laid waste by Russia.

A few days later on October 15, the city was returned to Lithuania, with the imposed condition, however, that a substantial number of Soviet soldiers be allowed to settle in its territory. This claim was presented first as a friendly request, but when faced with a Lithuanian refusal, as an ultimatum, “either give entry to our garrisons or we will destroy you in an unequal war”.

At the beginning, the Polish people greeted the arrival of the Lithuanians with relief, but unfortunately they were soon disappointed. On December 15, 1939 the university of Vilnius was closed, and the harsh repression of the Poles began.¹⁷⁴

Poles disappeared from the administrative offices in all the districts of Vilnius and were replaced by Lithuanian officials and employees. The study of the Lithuanian language was imposed on all school children.

Meanwhile, in Rózanystok, the Russians began their rampage. On September 19, 1939 all the buildings belonging to the Sisters, including the novitiate, became Russian military housing. The Sisters were dismissed without warning, because the invaders claimed that their educational criteria were ‘corrupt’, perhaps in a Socratic manner, or at least that they ‘spoiled’ the young. They were made to feel that it would have been better for everyone, beginning with themselves, if they had thrown their religious habits to the wind along with their whims of spirituality and Christian morals!

Mother Laura, having asked the advice of the Salesians, decided to send the novices back to their families. However, they were not all able to take that sensible advice because between them and their family homes lay roads bristling with checkpoints and

¹⁷⁴ *Informatio* 153; citazione da Halecki, Oscar, *Storia della Polonia*, Roma, Edizioni Hosianum, 1967.

drawn guns. She tried to find emergency accommodation for them among friendly, welcoming families.

Sr. Paula Rózek and Sr. Kazimiera Dymna were two of the novices who could not go to their families. With other companions and some of the Sisters, although not all together, they tried to reach Mother Laura at Laurów. They were caught in a huge roundup and were deported to Siberia.¹⁷⁵ There was no news about them for a long time. In Laurów it was not even known that this tragic incident had occurred.

Instead, Jadwiga Chodkowska along with a cousin, managed to reach the longed for destination of Laurów by means of an incredible hike. They walked for two weeks, while the severity of late autumn froze their blood; and what did they eat? They, too, met with the inevitable roadblocks. They said that they were returning home, to their mother, and miraculously they were believed.

Then their ‘mother’ really did welcome them. It was Mother Laura and they were her ‘daughters’.

Warnings of a dark future

The summer of 1939 was peaceful and even happy in Laurów. One hundred children were sent from Warsaw for a pleasant holiday, while those from a summer camp, managed by the social security office, arrived from Vilnius also to be restored a little in body and spirit. Moreover, some families had been welcomed at Polepie. As always they were happy to pay for a fortnight of fresh air up there among the trees, in full freedom of the country. The Polepie buildings swarmed with smiling holiday-makers.

Even Monsignor Karol Lubianiec had wanted to give himself a little holiday there. He was delighted with it. He felt that he had

¹⁷⁵ On the same page 153 of the *Informatio* the historian Oscar Halecki is again quoted. According to him deportation to hard labour in Siberia was a punishment of such severity that it was second only to the death penalty. It was applied, “to over a million and a half people”, men, women, and children, “guilty only of being Polish”.

won a lottery in giving the Sisters that land that was so fruitful with life and joy.

Actually, everyone knew that voices were circulating in the country that were anything but reassuring. However, no one expected the real bedlam that was about to happen. The name of Adolf Hitler was becoming ever more prominent in the newspapers. Completely intent on claiming a greater 'living space' for his Reich, he had his eyes fixed on the strip of Baltic territory that was known as the Danzig Corridor. One felt fear but still had hope. It was not yet the time to feel oneself sinking.

The annual retreat for the Sisters took place in August and it was possible to begin the new scholastic year even if the infamous September 1 had already appeared on the face of history.

The boys and girls went to school, certainly, but they had to face the already mentioned unpleasant imposition of having to use Lithuanian in their studies, even if they were and felt Polish.

The objective of the imposition, as always happens, was clear: to gradually destroy the cultural identity of a people, making them become like puppets in the hands of the dominator. At the time, however, the situation was accepted philosophically from a more or less positive angle: to know a new language is always an additional tool.

Something worse happened immediately. Provisions quickly became scarce, because the new government authorities would not tolerate offering help and support to children who came from the despised city of Warsaw. Even this was part of their plan for total subjugation.

Mother Laura wove together all the threads that were at hand in order to help and save. They were threads of sacrifice, anguish experienced personally, opportunities offered by this or that situation, hope and heartfelt prayer. There were 300 people under Laurów's roof and they all weighed on her heart. She knew, however, that they all had already weighed on the heart of the Lord

Jesus when, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the whole history of the world's pain had been distilled, drop by drop, into his veins.

Among her sacrifices was that of having to hide the fact that she was a religious. She had to adopt secular dress and this was a burden for her especially since, in the first half of the twentieth century, the habit was strongly linked to the identity of the person. She did it for her poor orphans and she did so willingly.

In March 1940 she managed to shuffle the cards in an almost miraculous way. Plotting secretly, and helped by the Lord's blessing, she managed to arrange for a Salesian to come to the school in Laurów, as rector: a clandestine Salesian, Fr. Jonas Žemajtis, whom she had known in Vilnius.

He was Lithuanian and immediately took on the air of a ruler but, underneath, he too had no other aim but to help. When he celebrated Mass secretly, he knew he was risking deportation to Siberia.

Then another Salesian, Fr. Idzi Ogierman came as a teacher. The *Informatio* recounts how, "He directed the choir and organised various performances. The young people learned Lithuanian more willingly with him".¹⁷⁶

It was later learned from Sr. Maria Pytel, that the pupils liked this professor so much that they suffered because they thought that he was a complete atheist. They prayed for his conversion and were delighted when, on Holy Thursday, they saw him in church kneeling before the confessor. Oh! Their prayer had been answered! Professor Ogierman had been converted!

But, then, the improbable happened. Some months later, two or three of those pupils, being in Vilnius for a medical examination, saw him at the altar in the church of Our Lady of Ostrobrama!

What was he doing at the altar?

¹⁷⁶ *Informatio* 157.

Something most unexpected. He was a priest and he was offering to the Father the Sacrifice of Jesus.

Meanwhile, in April of that same year, five Lithuanian Sisters had also come from Italy and America. They took the place of the Polish teachers, who were engaged instead in various services, like the kitchen, the garden, and other places where they would have no direct contact with the pupils. In this way, it was hoped to save the great educating community formed by the Sisters and the young people, which had as its only aim the liberating formation of many young lives.

Indeed, everything went well, but not without the occasional fly in the ointment. At times, approval or disapproval of this or that action insinuated itself within the community, based not so much on objective facts but rather on an innate sense of nationalism whether it be Polish or Lithuanian.

Mother Laura listened without ever judging and still less condemning, but with all her motherly wisdom always found a sincere and gentle word so that fraternal union triumphed. This overcame any ethnic, political, historical, or geographical borders, leading everyone to recognise the other in their common humanity, strengthened also by the no less common profession of Gospel life.



In November 1939 Sakiszki Wood, which had been given to the Sisters by Monsignor Lubianiec, was requisitioned by the State. Thus they also remained in the cold, because it was no longer possible to use that wood for heating. There were fifty-eight stoves to run, not counting the kitchen and the laundry!

The Sisters and the orphans had three days to provide fuel, and they worked day and night. But the long, cold winter was still to come. They did not even have horses to transport the wood, because the military authorities had taken them to use them for the war effort!

There was always the problem of putting something substantial into the pots and into their mouths. It is hard to say if this was a more or less serious problem than that of the cold. The children were growing and their hunger was insatiable.

The ration cards gave only the minimum for survival, certainly not the nourishment necessary for their future.

Sr. Zofia Sowińska, an invincible and courageous woman, was still in Laurów. She took a companion and a handcart and scoured the surroundings, making a pilgrimage among the various farmhouses in search of milk, wheat, and eggs. She had no intention of being a burden on others. She was ready to pay, perhaps even a little on the black market, because hunger was an ugly beast that was difficult to tame. People, however, also knew how to give.

This was true, up to a certain point, because one or two began to regard Sr. Zofia not so much as a beggar for alms but more as 'Polish'. Then the bags were filled less.

The Poles had always been friends, now instead, the urgency to get rid of them and regain national independence began to be felt. However, the proud Lithuanian people could not have foreseen the political upheaval that still awaited them.

Sr. Maria Pytel continued to offer herself as a more than competent nurse in that area where there were no doctors and she was paid with precious food.

It happened, however, that Sr. Zofia soon became ill. She was seriously ill, perhaps with a carbuncle.

She was placed on a farm cart and taken to hospital in Vilnius on February 22, 1940. She remained there for a long time because the infection was deep. The other nurse, Sr. Bronia, began to travel a good fifteen kilometres, between coming and going, to look after her. There were still some Sisters in Vilnius and they certainly did what they could. This, however, was not very extensive because their position with regard to the eagle-eyed authorities was anything but plain sailing!

When spring was already beginning to appear, Sr. Zofia Sowińska returned. Once again she took up her pilgrimage with the cart.

Yet, even if they lacked everything, Mother Laura and the faithful Sisters gave assistance to the victims of war. Sr. Helena Kwiecień's mother was one of these. She had seen her house in Vilnius collapse in flames under a bombardment, therefore, the doors of Laurów were opened to her.

Those doors opened every time suffering knocked on them, and also when grateful love knocked.

In March 1941 it was the turn of the postulant Donata Rajzer. She had received permission to cross the border into German territory where her family lived, but she did not want to leave without seeing Mother Laura. She managed to reach her during the night between March 5-6. That visit was for her a great treasure of memories, wisdom, and sincere and deep love that would stay with her forever.¹⁷⁷

A chronicle of blood and tears

In June 1940, the political situation changed. The Soviets tightened their grip on Lithuania and issued an ultimatum demanding the formation of a new pro-Soviet government and the admission of an unspecified number of Russian troops. Lithuania could not resist. Another 100,000 Soviet soldiers entered the country. The Lithuanian president sought refuge in Germany while the Russians took possession of everything. A little more than a month later, Lithuania became one of the Soviet Republics, The Peoples Soviet Republic of Lithuania.¹⁷⁸ At that time 12,000

¹⁷⁷ Cf. *Summarium* 190.

¹⁷⁸ This Republic, though apparently independent, fully corresponded to the political and economic structures of Moscow and its leaders were rigidly controlled. Agriculture and industry were nationalised. Many farmers, after the confiscation of their land were forced to urbanise. As if that were not enough, a carefully designed programme of impoverishment of Lithuanian culture was carried out, both by preventing the different manifestations of its identifying

Lithuanians were deported to Siberia and more than 3,000 were convicted of anti-Soviet activity.

Meanwhile, on June 10, Italy had also entered the war on the side of Germany and, therefore, in a position hostile to Russia. The Italian ambassador Angelo Cassinis had to leave Vilnius; he had arrived there on October 29, 1939 and left on August 24, 1940.

He wanted to take all the Italians with him, including Mother Laura Meozzi. He summoned her to Kowno, and suggested that she and her compatriots depart. Otherwise, he could not guarantee anything, neither aid nor safety.

Mother Laura refused. She wanted the others to go but she would remain. She would be the sentinel in Laurów as long as there was a single Sister there, whether she be Lithuanian or Polish. As for the possibility of her arrest and even deportation to Siberia, it was in God's hands.

Sr. Francesca Barucco reported her decisive phrase, "I cannot abandon these dear Sisters. Perhaps I will not have bread to give them, but until my tongue is torn out, I will always have a good word of comfort for them".

Sr. Maria Mazzoli chose to remain in Laurów with her; Sr. Francesca Barucco and Sr. Cleofe Brogginì, instead, returned to Italy.¹⁷⁹

characteristics and by trying to destroy the artistic patrimony of the country, especially with regard to its religious aspects. It initiated a strong Russian immigration, in order to speed up not only the process of making the country Russian but, above all, making it Soviet.

¹⁷⁹After the war, Sr. Francesca was not able to return to her beloved Polish mission. She served as linenarian in the house in Varazze, and was always serene and smiling. In 1966, she was transferred to Agliè, where the Sisters who needed particular health care were gathered. Gradually, she was shrouded in the veils of blindness and deafness. She was also affected by a type of paralysis of the tongue. She suffered from scruples, and was always obedient to whoever could help her. Her death in 1975 was preceded by a period of acute suffering, which she bore in a spirit of abandonment to the Lord Jesus.

In September 1940, at the beginning of the scholastic year, the property of the house and school was confiscated by the state. 'Mr.' Jonas was perhaps the first to be dismissed, not because his status as a priest had been discovered, but because he did not appear too enthusiastic about the political upheaval that had occurred. He was replaced by another Lithuanian, who was a prominent communist, a militant, and an avowed propagandist. He was also a former Franciscan, a certain Mr. Kudaba, also called Jonas, who had seen fit to not only get rid of the habit but also certain life styles that were too sombre. He found the Sisters to be a thorn in his side. He constantly threatened them with instant dismissal and he managed to do this almost as soon as he arrived there, even if he could not have the Sisters evicted from the house.

This Kudaba also had, among other things, the brilliant idea to set fire to a part of the library. Perhaps, those parts that reminded him of the not too distant past that still burned within him.

Then he taught the pupils to be 'free' doing everything the opposite to that which the Sisters would have wanted. They took advantage of this, but this came to a halt when Director Kudaba imposed school even on a Sunday so that they could not participate in the Mass. They liked the Mass, and even more it was desirable to pass the seventh day in peace and joy.

Mr. Kudaba then turned directly to Mother Laura. She, like a good teacher, must impose on the pupils to go to school even on a Sunday! But the pupils said, "Don't worry, *Mateczka*. He has said that we are now free without the Sisters; and we freely want the holiday and the Mass".

And the director? He thought it a good idea to leave them without lunch. But there was still the Sisters' kitchen. They went there, prepared a sandwich and off to the woods to eat it.

In order to solve the problem permanently, Mr. Kudaba sent the most 'rebellious' pupils away from the school. He sent them to a state school in Vilnius. What happened? Precisely there, in those temples of atheistic communism, the pupils found educators who gave them permission to be absent from school on Sundays so they

could attend Mass in the city's cathedral. They had the surprise of meeting their own educators there. They were clandestine Salesian clerics.

Those pupils, however, had another problem with a huge question mark. What were they supposed to do with meat on a Friday? They had chosen to give it secretly to the dogs. Then the bishop reassured them. "Eat. The Lord knows that you are not free to choose, and he wants to see you growing up healthy."

The younger orphans remained in Laurów, and they had very sharp antennae that helped them to understand the deepest reality of the people they had before them. When they realised that one of the teachers who turned up at that time was a believer like their Sisters, they confidently opened up. Furthermore, they made it a point of honour to always wear a medal of Our Lady around their necks. Then when a government inspector came, as frequently happened, they hid it under their tongues.



What had happened to the Sisters who were in other parts of Poland? Mother Laura could only receive news about Różanystok and Vilnius with great difficulty. What about the other Sisters, houses, works, children, the other young people? What had become of them? Where and how did they live? How were they surviving? Did they still have a little freedom?

Mother Laura did not know, and this pierced her heart like a crown of thorns.

What did the general council in Turin know about her? Communicating with Italy was as difficult as climbing the walls of an abyss.

One of her letters arrived, however, and was published in the *Notiziario*,¹⁸⁰ in the section about the general situation. The words were extremely measured because each one could bring grave

¹⁸⁰ *Notiziario delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, 12 dicembre 1940.

danger. She also used turns of phrase and substituted words in the hope that it would mislead the censor. Actually that was a mere illusion because there is not much difference between saying, “the Lord God helps us” and, “our Friend helps us”; and the censors were not as naive as she wanted to believe. In fact, they had eyes and ears and were sharp-witted enough to know immediately when a letter was written by a religious and was destined for another religious. However, in those times that was what one did; and certainly not only in Poland.

Here are some parts of the letter:

Some news from us: those of the family are still in the same place, but the work, circumstances, and events that have happened have changed our daily life into a continual martyrdom. I am often with my sisters, and I see them serene and tranquil and ready for anything. How beautiful and comforting is this detachment from what is fleeting, to hold on tightly to what is real, to what does not change and will last forever!

The children are all relatively well. Health is not lacking and in the present conditions that is a real miracle.

Me too; I have never been as well as I am now. How good is the Lord! In the morning when we wake up he always gives us some lovely gift, to give us courage to spend the day well, to comfort us and make us stronger.

Winter has already begun here and we don't have all that we need for an establishment like ours. It is cold, everything is frozen and the falling snow freezes immediately. The food also will soon be lacking, like everywhere else. Despite this, and what can be foreseen, we are tranquil, because, I repeat with joy, there is One who thinks of everything and who leads us by the hand over steep and completely new thorny paths. But with him we go forward, not only sure to be unharmed, but certain that we will arrive at the desired goal.

Then there is a postscript.

While I was about to send this, we were told to find work elsewhere and to leave the house quickly. It is a deeply felt sorrow, because we must separate. But we will do it willingly and try to do our best to help each other. What can we do? He moves along with great strides and we have to follow him. But be tranquil. We are happy

and we thank God, offering for you all that divine goodness gives us every day.

In that year 1940, there was a 'nice Christmas gift'. A new superintendent or bursar, perhaps Jewish but certainly communist, was appointed along with a new cook. The provisions storeroom was securely closed to the Sisters.

On the day of the Epiphany, the Mass for the Sisters was celebrated secretly on the desk in Mother Laura's room.

It might have been the last, because the Sisters had received the order to leave. The house no longer belonged to them; they were merely intruders. In future, the 'hammer and sickle' would think about continuing the work.

However, something unexpected happened. The government commissioner who, from Vilnius, had been influencing the fate of the Sisters, came to Mother Laura. His four year old daughter was seriously ill. He was afraid he would lose her and asked if a Sister who was a nurse could take care of her.

But who was this commissioner? It was none other than Mr. Kudaba, the former Franciscan and the sworn enemy of the Sisters. Despite everything, the love for his daughter turned out to be to the Sisters' advantage. It was a love that led him to rely on Mother Laura and some of the other Sisters.

Who did Mother call on for this mission? Actually, Sr. Maria Pytel, one who, for various reasons, had more right than anyone to be angry with Kudaba!

In fact, she rebelled there and then. Why did she have to go into the house of someone who had treated the community so badly?

Mother Laura however, did not feel that she should turn a vengeful ear to that request. "If someone throws a stone at you, give them bread instead," she replied.

Sr. Maria Pytel bowed her head and opened her heart. She cared for the child for more than a month, lovingly accompanying her back to health. The commissioner repaid her by giving them back a part of the library.

Krynica: a refuge illumined by hope

Despite all this, the Sisters, too, were ‘accompanied’ toward the unknown. They left Laurów and reported to the relocation office in Vilnius. It is not known exactly how many Sisters there were, because the documentation for those years is hardly reliable; they were perhaps about twenty. It is known that some of them were redirected to the factories in Vilnius, or as kitchen personnel, or to provide other services. The weakest were excused. Mother Laura managed to have them move into hospitable Catholic families as domestic workers.

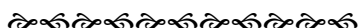
What about her? The *Positio* states, without any further explanation, that she and “some others” with the support of regular medical certificates, were declared unfit. They would just have to manage. Fortunately, an Orthodox woman offered to rent, and then gave them free of charge, a house in Krynica, in a wooded area about a kilometre from Laurów, where an elderly chaplain was already residing.

Some names can be learned from Sr. Maria Pytel’s deposition. [It has not been possible to verify, in this and the subsequent paragraph, which place two of the Sisters mentioned below were given shelter, because documentation of the time is incomplete – translators’ note]. The Orthodox woman was called Barlicka, the elderly chaplain’s surname was Jeziorek and the Sisters who went immediately to that house with Mother Laura were Sr. Bronisława Rudzka, Sr. Marta Pułkownik, Sr. Jadwiga Mrugowska and Sr. Wanda Ulbrych. Sometime later, when the work in Laurów was finished, Sr. Maria Pytel and Sr. Fująówna also went there.¹⁸¹

Another three Sisters: Zofia Sowińska, Jadwiga Mrugowska and Wanda Ulbrych, instead, were housed in Mr. Gierszowicz’s villa. He was a most generous Jewish doctor who not only received

¹⁸¹ Cf. *Positio* 161 e *Copia Publica* 1587.

them free of charge, but every week also gave them, “a bag of four to six kilos of salami and bacon”¹⁸².



A letter that had made its rounds appeared sometime later. It was from Sr. Rita to Santina, her sister-in-law. In it Sr. Rita quoted a few sentences taken from another letter, this time addressed to her and written by her sister, Sr. Laura. Here are the exact words:

We, too, are happy even like this, because we have nothing that binds us to the earth, and we can say like Job, ‘That which you have given me I have returned to you, and I am stripped of everything except my heart and my will, which are yours completely’. The Sisters who are young and strong go to work to earn bread for those who cannot because they are old or ill.

She was almost sixty years old.

Almost immediately, Krynica became the ‘family home’. When they could take advantage of a day off, the Sisters who worked in Vilnius had no problem choosing their ‘tourist’ destination. They went to Krynica, even in the biting cold, and even if each time danger was lurking around every corner.

But there is always something in the human heart: something great, insatiable, something like an endless dream, that leads one to take a risk, to go above and beyond any need for security. And those Sisters hungered for that warm light which emanated from the human heart of Mother Laura and took on the unique consistency of hope.

Mother Laura always had her arms wide open and her heart overflowing. Her hands were open to give the little at her disposal, and raised in humble, confident prayer. Sr. Maria Pytel said, “She knew how to inspire courage in frightened hearts tried by apprehension and concern, ‘Do not be afraid! The Lord is with us everywhere’”¹⁸³.

¹⁸² Ibid. *Copia Publica*.

¹⁸³ *Summarium* 127.

They came, not only from Vilnius, but also from much further away, as soon as they could.

- Two cousins, for example, both novices called Chodkowska (it is a pity not to know also their first names), when they had to leave Różanystok, they thought it best to go to Mother Laura before returning to their family. They had to walk for dozens of kilometres, sleeping who knows where, eating who knows what, and overcoming their trembling every time they were faced with a roadblock. But they wanted to get there.

- Sr. Donata Rajzer said:

Since my surname is German, I obtained permission to cross the border and be reunited with my parents. First, however, I wanted to greet Mother Laura. I arrived on foot in the middle of the night. I was welcomed with extreme kindness, then in the morning, *Mateczka* acquired a farm cart to take me back to Vilnius. Seeing me arriving in this way, the family for whom I worked as a nanny said, 'Now we can see that you really have a mother'. Then, when I was with my family I received letters that gave me great joy. Yet, I was just a postulant.¹⁸⁴

There was even a type of plenary meeting in Krynica, during Easter 1941. All the Sisters who worked in private households came. The accommodation was very crowded but everyone found a place because their joy was great.

The Sisters felt happy because Mother Laura lived among them and profoundly shared all the misfortunes that touched the Polish people. She greatly felt the injustice and evil of that cruel war. Her noble, sensitive heart shared the suffering of all.

This can be read in the *Summarium*¹⁸⁵ and is attested by someone who lived in community with her, Sr. Aniela Olczyk, author of a study entitled, *Genesis and Development of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*.

¹⁸⁴ Whenever possible, Mother Laura wrote to her dispersed daughters in Lithuania and sometimes she made use of sporadic opportunities for hand delivery, also to those on the other side of the line of the river Bug.

¹⁸⁵ *Summarium* 538.

What should have been a hermitage inhabited by people who could no longer work became instead a centre of attraction. Even the students from the school in Laurów went secretly to Krynica, whenever they could, and they, too, were taking a risk. They wanted to tell their stories, to give voice to their feelings, to feel loved and understood. They wanted to enjoy a little of that maternal presence that they knew was profound, sincere, and personal.



There in Krynica, in May 1941, the very real possibility of deportation to Siberia for Mother Laura and her companions appeared like a monster. The Sisters knew that their names were printed on an evil list. Sr. Maria Pytel told the Process that, “they were prepared and even kept their suitcases ready”.

Then something mysterious happened. One day a Soviet truck stopped at the door of the house. Some soldiers got out with their machine guns raised. They looked around very carefully without even saying a word. Nor did the Sisters say anything, paralysed as they were with fear.

Then after a while, without a word being said, the truck left just as it had come. The reason has never been known.

Who were those soldiers looking for? Perhaps the ‘foreigner’ Laura Meozzi? And why did they not see her?

She was there on the veranda, dressed like an elderly country woman, with a scarf on her head tied Russian style. She was peeling a lot of potatoes.



What about the students in Laurów? Their new ‘educators’ had declared them to be free: free from all the whims and systems of those strange women who knew only how to trace useless, archaic signs of the cross on their own bodies and knew nothing about the world or life.

Sunday could have been an empty day for these students, perhaps to be filled with some secret drinking or with card games that could have ended in a brawl. Instead, they liked something else. One of them, a certain Mr. Kazimier Pawinski, said years later, “We escaped to go and visit Mother Laura. She welcomed us with open arms and heart. She comforted and encouraged us, she washed our souls”.

Those secret visits did not always go smoothly, because those indulgent ‘educators’ could also rain down blows on any of those young people who were recognised as belonging to the Church. Certainly, the password was ‘freedom,’ but only as their ‘educators’ understood it.

Chapter Five

A TURN FOR THE WORSE

Humans treated like trash

At a certain point in 1941, the mutual Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and Russia completely collapsed. War broke out between the two countries on June 22, and Lithuania was once again caught between them.

The first reaction was to remain independent, neither Russian nor German. A provisional government was formed; but what could it do against the large, experienced armies?

This time the invasion came from the Nazis. Lithuania had ceased to be one of the Soviet Republics and was transformed into a German-administered district of the Reichskommissariat Ostland. This was the name given to some of the eastern territories of the Third Reich, not only Lithuania but also Estonia and Latvia on the Baltic Sea as well as Belarus in the interior. This situation lasted until 1944, causing great suffering for the people who were left alive.



Russia and the Third Reich who had been friends, so to speak, in the beginning like Herod and Pilate, became enemies. There was, however, one activity that continued to be supported by both, thus becoming a common denominator, 'deportations'.

When Lithuania was still under the domination of the Russians, just before the fresh outbreak of war in May 1941, there was a rapid intensification in the deportation of Poles. Entire families: fathers, mothers, and even small children, were permanently uprooted from their land, their homes, and their normal lives.

It was the same for the Sisters, and Mother Laura knew it beforehand when someone clandestinely showed her name along with those of others in black and white on a list. At one point a nurse from Laurów brought her the news of an almost imminent arrest. Mother Laura, in reality, was not Polish, she was Italian; but during the time of war, this was perhaps even worse than the former. She knew it, but did not give in. She was determined not to move, but at the same time invited the Sisters to flee and disappear completely. Instead, like her, they too said 'no'. They preferred to run the risk and be deported in a single block.

Shortly after, under Nazi domination, it was the turn of the Jewish people, who were numerous in Vilnius. Two ghettos were set up. The smaller one was almost immediately left deserted in as much as its "guests" had already been murdered or deported to extermination camps in early October 1941. The larger one, instead, survived until 1943, although its population had been decimated many times.

The great revolt of Warsaw of September 1, 1943, gave the final blow. Overall ninety-five percent of the Jews were murdered. Among the victims of mass executions at Ponary in Lithuania, to the west of the 'old town' of Vilnius, there were also about 30,000 Poles: prisoners of war, partisans, or intellectuals.¹⁸⁶



So much for the deportations. Going back for a moment, some other facts need to be considered.

186 The name *Ponary* (in German: *Ponaren*) comes from a hilly region, about ten kilometres from the centre of the city of Vilnius. It is located near the Vilnius-Warsaw railway. The massacre began in July 1941 when a special Einsatzkommando unit rounded up 5,000 Jews of Vilnius and killed them in Ponary. Subsequent massacres took place during the summer and autumn. By the end of the year more than 40,000 Jews had been killed in Ponary. The total number of victims up until the end of 1944 is estimated between 70,000 to 100,000. Cf. Internet Website *Wikipedia*.

Toward the end of May 1941, the Germans unleashed the deadly Operation Barbarossa against the Russians, which is remembered in history as, “the largest military land operation of all time”.¹⁸⁷ In the month of June, the Russians beat a retreat from the Lithuanian territory, while the rest of Poland still remained firmly in the hands of the Germans.

At Vilnius, the keys of administrative powers were nominally returned into the hands of the Lithuanians who, though swallowing endless insults, allied with the Germans, knowing very well that their government authorities were nothing more than highly unstable puppets of very precarious appearance.

The strength of love built on suffering

The fact was, however, that ‘Mr. Jonas’ returned to Laurów and was reinstated in his post as director of the boarding and day school. His identity as a Salesian priest remained strictly secret.

Before accepting this responsibility he set a condition: the reinstatement of all the staff members who were there when he was the director. It was accepted and thus the Sisters could return to Laurów. Sr. Maria Aleksandrowicz and Sr. Jadwiga Kondratowicz, both Polish, were sent by Mother Laura to the city of Kaunas to learn the Lithuanian language well.

They were guests of some other Sisters. Mother Laura followed them closely by writing to them every week so that they

187 The Eastern Front which opened at the beginning of this operation was the largest and most important theatre of war in the entire World War II. Some of the largest and bloodiest battles in history took place here. In the four years that followed the opening of hostilities between Germany and the Soviet Union, tens of millions of soldiers and civilians lost their lives or suffered untold misery, both because of the harsh and incessant clashes and the poor living conditions in which they found themselves. The operation, which began less than two months after Hitler’s failure in the Battle of Britain, should have been a crucial turning point to ensure the total victory of the Third Reich and its dominance of the Eurasian continental block, but its failure, absorbing most of the human, economic and military resources of Germany, caused the complete defeat. Cf. *Wikipedia*.

did not feel isolated from the community. This aroused the interest and admiration of the religious who had welcomed them into their midst.

The return to Laurów occurred on August 12, 1941. They found the house in very poor condition, if not devastated, and immediately began to roll up their sleeves. They were able to do so quite easily because the task of following the children in the school and on the playground was not entrusted to them, but to the Lithuanian teachers and workers. Their presence, however, was most welcome and well-defined. It was enough to wait for the arrival of a time of greater freedom.

Mother Laura was for all, a benevolent, firm, and highly efficacious sentry.

In his letter to Sr. Maria Pytel dated July 8, 1985, Fr. Jonas Žemajtis, recalling what was by now a distant past, wrote as follows:

We all brought our grief and joys to Mother. We would go to her for advice because she was the central driving force of the orphanage. Even during the difficult times of war, she was very serene, especially regarding the maintenance of such a big family, because she had unlimited trust in Divine Providence. In addition to the staff, the orphans alone were more than three hundred. She inculcated in us only one thing: to be co-operators with Divine Providence, particularly in carrying out our works. Since we had fields close to the institute, Mother was interested in getting as much produce as possible from the land. With indefatigable work, the resourceful Sisters cultivated a vast vegetable garden.

A significant episode is also narrated:

During one of those years, the tomato crop was flourishing. Each plant bore its weight supported by sturdy wooden stakes. After the tomatoes ripened, when it was time for the first harvest, one night in early September, a heavy frost descended, freezing everything. In the morning, after having made my usual rounds in the garden, I went to report it to Mother. She recollected herself for a moment of prayer with folded hands, eyes half closed, a peaceful, almost

smiling face, she repeated in a barely audible whisper, Fiat voluntas tua. I, instead, holding my head in my hands, said thoughtlessly, 'But, Lord, why such a great punishment?' Mother became serious and sad; paused for a moment and then with a firm voice said, 'Director, only the Lord knows how dear your friendship is to me. But if you make an insulting remark to him, I am ready to give it up'.

In that same letter 'Mr. Jonas' affirmed:

I attribute my first encounter with Mother Laura to a special grace from the Lord, perhaps, because of my unconditional obedience to my Superior, Fr. Antanas Skeltys of blessed memory. That obedience cost me very much: to go as a director to the Sisters, almost all Polish, while I understood almost nothing of the Polish language! But it was the need of the hour. Thus early in 1940 I entered the orphanage of Laurów and remained there until 1946 [except for the period from September 1940 to June 1941]. It was a very difficult time, and yet we did not lack the essentials. Remember dear Sisters, we attributed this to the unlimited confidence of Mother in Divine Providence. She united us with a divine love that was connected to the centre of charity, Jesus in the Eucharist. The memory of the moment I gave her Communion remains so vivid in my mind. She had such a smiling face as if she was saying to the Lord Jesus, 'I was waiting for you and you came'. This was all the more noticeable when we were reduced to gathering together in my room for Mass very early in the morning, before the children would awaken.

I did not understand how those Sisters could resist so much hard labour. We worked beyond our strength. We often lacked even the night's rest. There was no electricity. The water had to be drawn with a bucket from a deep well. The heating of the various places depended on wood burning stoves and the firewood had to be brought from the surrounding woodlands. Yet, the Sisters were always happy and cheerful. Once, jokingly, I reproached Mother for having kept the best and holiest Sisters for herself. She remarked with a smile that some of them had a difficult character, and were also rather reluctant, but that, after all, they were working for the

*Lord and that there was no one who would not be willing to make any sacrifice for Jesus.*¹⁸⁸

Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak, the first biographer of Mother Laura, also reiterated everything that has been said and added this observation of vital importance:

When the authorities began pressuring for the removal of Mother Laura from the house because of her advanced age, the Sisters decidedly declared that all of them were ready to leave the place together with her. However, thanks to the work and sacrificing spirit of the Sisters, the Laurów educational institute had become one of the model educational establishments in Lithuania, the authorities relented and Mother remained with her daughters.

The forced diaspora: abandonment to God's Providence

At that time, whether in the so-called German Poland or in the so-called Lithuanian Poland, chaos reigned supreme. Although, as has been said, 'Mr. Jonas' had returned to Laurów, in the other parts they were closing the houses and the communities were forced to disperse. The Sisters, in any case, had the grave fault of not being Lithuanians, Germans, or Russians but Poles, and this was unforgivable. The Soviet leadership and that of the Nazis, as well, by reflection or also for historical reasons, the Lithuanians considered the presence of the Poles with their ethnic reality and culture like a thorn in their side. They tried in various ways to silence them, making them feel the weight of the ruler's oppression.

Works were closed one after another and communities were dispersed. The Sisters went to carry out various jobs for priests or for family friends.

The following are some of these painful events, which highlight the exceptional exercise of courage, hope, humanity, and evangelical perseverance.

¹⁸⁸ *Summariusum* 459 sgg.

Sr. Janina Wawrzyniak belonged to the community of Vilnius. She was about thirty years old. Along with the Sisters she was brutally torn from her educational activities. Here are some excerpts from her story.

For the moment the Sisters found hospitality with the Salesians, but it was necessary that they procure paid employment. The community of the Salesians also was in the process of being dissolved. As suggested and requested by the bishop, they dispersed among the surrounding parishes.

Sr. Janina went to be the housekeeper in the new house of one of these priests.

As soon as the decision had been made, her community animator, Sr. Maria Mazzoli succeeded, not without difficulty, in telephoning Mother Laura informing her of what was about to take place already the next day.

Sr. Janina wrote in her testimony:

Immediately the next morning as I was about to leave, a farm cart arrived at our door. Mother Laura got down from it. She, who could not even bear a comfortable journey, had travelled more than twenty kilometres in the biting cold of late autumn during the early hours before dawn. Why? To see her daughter who was leaving. 'Is Janina here?', she asked quickly. Then she said to me, 'I could not let you go without a greeting; I also want to know whether you are leaving willingly, without any external constraints'. She also wanted to make sure that I had everything that I needed. I was deeply touched by her action which in those circumstances had been heroic. She did not do it only for me! She treated everyone in such a way that each person thought herself to be the privileged one.

Another significant episode involved is that of Sr. Franciszka Tubielewicz, who was also in her thirties. She related it to Sr. Domenica Grassiano, some forty years later, with a joy as if it had just happened.

When Rózanystok also became a war zone, she managed to reach Laurów, but when the Sisters had to leave the institute to which they had dedicated themselves totally, she fled toward her family who were living seventy kilometres away. Then, when the situation permitted, she wanted to go with her sister the 140

kilometres, there and back, and on foot to visit Mother Laura! "But we did it willingly and with joy. I will never forget Mother's warm welcome."

During my stay in the family she wrote several letters to me, which were a real treasure, and it pained me so much to have to destroy them in order to obey the recommendations that had been given to us, for reasons of caution, during the post-war period.

During the period of this dispersion, creativity, courage, and solidarity were intensified daily. Not all of the facts are known. But the reality was that the Sisters remained faithful to their vocation, overcoming barriers and dangers of all kinds, trying to carry out their educational activities.

At Łódź, for example, some of them were able to find refuge in the house of an Italian woman, who risked a great deal, perhaps even her life. In that house the Sisters could also offer a sewing course for Polish girls, who with a useful skill in hand, succeeded in eluding forced labour in Germany. According to the *Copia Publica*, about 600 girls were saved.

There were also some clandestine departures of Polish Sisters to Italy.¹⁸⁹ Mother Laura, instead, remained there, firm and secure like a sentinel of the Lord. She wanted to watch over the Sisters, both those who remained in the community and those who officially vanished into anonymity but who nevertheless still felt her presence in the territory as a support and a secret force.

Just before the house was requisitioned by the Nazis, a firm and steady hand wrote these words in the chronicle of Łódź, "The Polish people seek salvation in God's mercy".

Only much later did Mother Laura come to know that even that house had been lost. They also recounted that the Sisters had been warned by a member of the German military who was a clandestine priest. He had told them, "Consume the consecrated Hosts and then leave; do not allow yourselves to be found here".

¹⁸⁹ Cf. *Positio* 154.

So it was that the community was scattered to different locations. Three Sisters went to their family, four of them had hoped to reach the oasis of Laurów, who knows how and when. But, instead, they had to stop in Warsaw, where the Sisters of St. Elizabeth welcomed them as linen room attendants in a hospital still run by them.

Sr. Maria Giebel, because of her German surname, had been able to remain in Łódź where she and her sister Anna were given hospitality by an Italian industrialist. Here she was able to open a sewing class which saved dozens of girls from deportation.

Mother Laura was not in Łódź and did not ethnically belong to the Polish people (by spiritual choice, yes, she belonged), but she knew that the Lord's mercy is universal, and in those fearful moments, as in any other circumstances, it was the only point where all the forces of body and spirit converge. He alone knew the 'why' of everything, even the reason for the horror unleashed on the world. In the profound depths of the mystery, he alone understood, and he alone could and would save his scattered children and create a whole new world, starting not merely from zero but from below zero, from an abyss of nameless nothingness. Mother Laura believed in mercy, and made herself its constant apostle, with her word, yes, but above all by expressing its irresistible features in her person.

The relative calm in the Lithuanian territories lasted for about six months. But then the wolf opened its mouth again. The colour of his jaws had changed. The hammer and sickle were gone and the swastika appeared. In February 1942 the deportation to Germany for forced labour began. Priests and religious, including women were particularly targeted. These were considered a nuisance because no matter what their role in society was, they always carried an intolerable message of peace.

The Archbishop of Vilnius Romuald Jałbrzykowski was also exiled. It was he who had authorised the exposition of the image of the Merciful Jesus to the faithful so that it could be venerated during Mass on April 28, 1935, the second Sunday of Easter. He was imprisoned under the Nazis for two years and later liberated

by the Soviets just in time for a new exile, this time to the Polish territory from where he had to assist the Soviet attempts to wipe his 'annoying' archdiocese from the map.



It was Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak who was to bring to Laurów the news of the new deportations that had seriously affected the FMA. In Vilnius there was a raid by the Gestapo. On March 22, 1942, and eight Sisters had been arrested. Everyone sensed an icy breath in the air. Mother Laura, her eyes brimming with tears, stared pleadingly at the image of the Merciful Jesus.

She then asked Sr. Jadwiga, "And you?"

Sr. Jadwiga had shown them an X-ray of her badly damaged lungs. They were full of threatening scars of some kind of disease, in remission, yes, but still lurking. So they tried to re-educate her.

But she did not feel at all like a soldier excluded from the battle. She was bold and courageous. Every week she presented herself punctually at the prison in Vilnius as a 'Father Christmas', a poor 'Father Christmas', but one full of good will, totally committed to appeasing in some way the extreme hunger suffered by the prisoners.

How did she do this? With whatever she and several other Sisters could collect, by knocking at the door of those who felt like offering them something.

It was a long walk, but the chronicle observed that Sr. Jadwiga passed between checkpoints almost like an ethereal being; the soldiers did not make fun of her and did not attempt to abuse her though she was, 'a pretty girl'. Mother Laura was aware of the dangers to which she was exposed, but her deep sense of prayer was much stronger. "During all the time of your journey, I will pray to the Lord for you."

She would also have liked to go in person to comfort 'her' prisoners, but the asthma that gripped her would never have allowed her to walk those snowy streets.

There is an episode that seems finely balanced between the absurd and the miraculous.

Why absurd? Because, in those very hard and difficult situations, Mother Laura wanted to give priority to the purchase of a frame, but the little money that was available was very much needed to lessen at least a little of the 'black hunger' that was spoken of previously.

It was a frame for the picture of the Merciful Jesus, which had just been painted by Sr. Bronia!

Mother Laura wanted it to be beautiful said Sr. Jadwiga, indeed, "very beautiful". Certainly, it was very expensive, to the tune of almost 70 *złoty*!

"Mother, if I buy the frame I will not have any money left for food."

"You will find more money; buy the frame."

Scandalous! Whoever said that a frame, even if it be for a picture of the Merciful Jesus, should have been preferred to satisfying the hunger of a group of imprisoned Sisters?

However, there is another side of the story that assumes the hint of the miraculous.

Sr. Jadwiga went to the refugee office to request money for the purchase of food. They understood the need but they, too, had no money. But one of the officers, who had been Sr. Jadwiga's professor while she was studying at the university, immediately, gave her another address saying, "Tell them that I am sending you".

At that address the Sister found an envelope addressed to her: an envelope containing 700 *złoty*. They did not say who offered that money.

Therefore, Sr. Jadwiga, after making all her purchases, returned home with a sum of 640 *złoty*.

FMA prisoners

It is not known exactly when, but after about two months the prison doors were opened. They were opened only because those

who had been 'released' had to pack a small suitcase and within a few days board a cattle truck, which would be leaving on June 9, for Germany. There, forced labour awaited them.

The Sisters took advantage of that tiny window of freedom to go immediately to Mother Laura who was waiting for them at the door.

Sr. Stefania Kolodziejczyk said, "The letters she wrote to us after this, instilled in us courage and hope for a better future".¹⁹⁰

The Nazi oppression was bristling with machine guns all the time. Bombs were falling from the sky. They fell in large numbers throughout the country because the tyrant of Berlin knew only this type of 'words' to convince the people about the 'goodness' of his 'vital' choices.

Even at Laurów, where the only hazardous military targets to be hit bore the faces of orphan children, the words of the Third Reich fell noisily. They had to leave the house and hide in the woods, entrusting their lives to the compassionate arms of the age old trees. The house of the Sisters however could not be camouflaged. Its zinc roof shone almost as if to attract the attention of the bombers. However, in a sky higher than that in which the planes were flying, there was always 'Someone' who was capable of providing miraculous solutions. The prayers of everyone rose directly to this higher heaven but especially those of Mother Laura and the children. These prayers had a special stamp because they invoked grace and salvation even for their enemies.

They also received news about the Sisters who lived in central Poland. A very dangerous and secret line of communication had been formed which, perhaps, depended on the partisans.

Sr. Jadwiga Górka, who became the point of contact between Laurów and the other communities, was willing to risk all for the sake of the Institute. One day, in the city of Sokołów Podlaski, this Sister was pinned against the wall along with the other Sisters and she found herself facing machine guns. Then she and the others

¹⁹⁰ *Summarium* 477.

were expelled from their house and after walking for several days they arrived at Łódź where a friendly family welcomed them.

Sr. Jadwiga preserved many of the letters she received from Mother Laura during this time:

- *We are alive and healthy and are working as usual during these very difficult times. We are preparing ourselves constantly more and more, to meet with the various surprises that can come at any moment. It's a wonderful lesson, indeed a treasure because we do not get attached to this earthly exile. We try to live on a high, very high plain where the darkness of earth does not reach.*

- *Be tranquil regarding me; I am feeling as usual: you know my health conditions. The presence of my daughters helps me to live these difficult situations and I can say that I don't run short of anything. I am content with what we have and with the obvious help of God we can always go ahead confidently toward a better future. To you I recommend: 'do what good you can to those around you and be always peaceful and full of good hope that we will see each other again and I am already happy thinking about the day of our meeting.*

- *Until now we have enjoyed the happiness of living under the same roof with Our Lord Jesus, receiving him daily and having him as guest in our hearts. In this way, the work and the difficulties of the present times are not too heavy because his presence dispels everything.*¹⁹¹

Mother Laura indicated pathways of hope to everyone and always, even and especially during the destructive days of war. It was a hope that sprang from a rock-solid faith, warmed by love in a Father who does not leave even a sparrow without a morsel of food.

To Sr. Franciszka Matusiewicz, who had taken refuge with her family in March 1943, Mother Laura wrote:

I understand your loneliness. But we must resign ourselves to God's will. We can do nothing but praise God and his inscrutable plans. Create in your heart a solitary cell, which can be entered by your spouse alone. To him you must remain faithful in all things, even the

¹⁹¹ Dalcerci, op.cit., 353. lettere 3, 6, 8, 357-359.

*smallest; and he will make you taste his sweet and infinite love. Do not forget me in your prayers. I was ill during this winter and I am only beginning to get up now. I owe this to your prayers.*¹⁹²

To the Sisters deported to Germany she found a way to send her affectionate words of courage and fidelity. These letters have not survived because it was not possible to store them in places where the raids were more frequent than daily bread.

There were other Sisters who did not receive any letters from Mother Laura but lived at her side. These Sisters were cold and hungry, oppressed by thousands of difficulties, surrounded by people who were suspicious and did not spare harsh and scornful words regarding their identity as Poles, women, and religious.

For them there was always the evening, a time of grace in which they gathered together in *Mateczka's* little room, to experience being a family. There, they were able to say everything, narrate and even cry; and then they would listen: listen to a word that came from the depths and reached to the depths of life. She understood and shared everything; she felt in herself the sufferings of others and led them humbly and little by little to a genuine encounter with the gentle light of the Lord Jesus in the reality of life's circumstances.

She guided them to accept, to endure, to offer, to espouse the passion of the Lord and to lay down everything quietly and lovingly at the foot of his cross.

To discover in every person, even in the one who is hostile and harbours enmity, a call to love, to forgive and to show mercy. We do not know anything about each other but the Lord knows all about us. He has nothing but the most delicate love for us. He has called us friends; we serve him day after day through all that life offers us.

Fr. Zemajtis, 'Mr. Jonas', observed, "One evening, returning late from Vilnius, I found all the Sisters sitting at the feet of

¹⁹² Ibid. lettera 169.

Mother for the Good Night. They were listening to her with rapt attention as if listening to one of Jesus' apostles".¹⁹³



The government authorities, perhaps reluctantly, accepted Sr.Zofia Sowińska as the person responsible for what had been renamed the Children's Home. Sr. Zofia, Sr. Maria Pytel and Sr.Jadwiga Górka were still going around begging. The food, however, was insufficient for all. The fields remained uncultivated because the men were at war and the women, whether they wanted it or not, replaced them in the factories. Only the elderly and the children remained as farmers.

Then, following a bright idea of Mother Laura, even the orphans turned themselves into farm hands. They went around helping here and there on the farms and were paid in kind with groceries.

Despite all this, once it happened that they reached the point of even lacking potatoes. Mother Laura then took one of the few remaining potatoes to the church; she hung it on St. Joseph's hand and told him that it was his business to provide. Shortly after, an unknown benefactor knocked on the door with a cart full of exceptional potatoes.



One of those young farmers mentioned above was Marian Delasiński. Here is what he wrote in 1987, on the occasion of the canonical proceedings, when he was almost fifty-five years of age:

I was working for a harsh, demanding farmer. Early in the morning, I received my portion of bread and milk for the entire day and went to work in the fields or to pasture the cows. I used to bring "home" something when I returned to Laurów on Sunday, but then, after one

¹⁹³ *Summarius* 463.

year I was delighted to see my master handing over to the Sisters, 'six hundred kilograms of potatoes and twelve hundred kilograms of wheat', in payment for my work and that of others.

Marian then shared something of his dreadful childhood.

Six weeks after his birth, he had been abandoned in a garbage bin near the orphanage in Warsaw. He was entrusted to the Sisters of Charity at Vilnius and at the age of five he was brought to Laurów. He soon found a 'mother' in Mother Laura, who succeeded in calming his rebelliousness, even when it totally confused the Sisters.

Later, he went through difficult and painful situations at different times during the war, but he always overcame them by confiding in the Sisters. If he had become a good worker and the father of a family, he owed it to the Sisters and in a unique and very special way to his dear Mother Laura.

1943-1945: one enormous freezing winter

The year 1943 was one of serious setbacks for the Third Reich. It is enough to glance through the calendar of events.

- January: Fall of Stalingrad where there was a strong concentration of German troops.

- March-May: The allies drove the Germans from Africa.

- July: The allies landed in Sicily and driving back the Nazi troops began to move north through Italy. On July 25, Benito Mussolini was deposed in Rome.

- September: Italy, no longer Fascist, signed an agreement with the allies. The Germans were confined to Northern Italy. The partisans began a very strong anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist resistance.

- December: At the Tehran Conference the final defeat of Hitler's armies began to be planned for, although the victory would take more than a year.

Meanwhile, during that winter of 1943, the Germans had begun withdrawing their forces from the previously conquered positions in Russian and Lithuanian territories. They retreated to

the Polish city of Bialystok, northeast of Warsaw, also crossing the great river Bug, in whose waters many fleeing Jewish refugees had already lost their lives during the previous years.

The Russians therefore, while pursuing the Germans, also invaded Poland. The situation became more difficult than ever. Deportations increased. They wanted to make the whole of Poland, Russian.



In that portion of Poland-Lithuania under consideration, the woods of Sakiszki came to be considered as providential. Groups of partisans gathered there along with people who were being sought after for ethnic or political motives. Some thieves and criminals also took shelter there.

At times, some of these forced guests knocked on the door of Laurów, asking for food. And Mother Laura multiplied her scant resources, without ever asking if the applicant was friend or foe, honest or assassin. For her, it was enough to know that it was a person who was in need of the most basic means of survival.

Here is a statement from Sr. Maria Pytel:

I cannot say exactly how Mother Laura managed to deal with the poor, the sick, the unbelievers or even the adversaries of the Church. Since Mother herself was of delicate health and often was not well, her intervention was not always direct but rather through the Sisters. She, however, showed herself to be sensitive to all the needs of the poor, the orphans and the sick by urging the Sisters to provide for their essential needs such as food, hygiene, instruction, and education. In this connection I have a personal recollection. Once, soon after the war I had received a little meat and sugar as a gift and I took it home for the Sisters. Mother, however, knowing the situation of my family, had me send it to my mother who was ill and without any means of sustenance. Moreover, my brother had been arrested at that time.

Often, with what she had, Mother Laura fed the refugees and the soldiers and urged us never to allow anyone to leave the house, hungry. During the bombardments, Salesian priests would come to

us seeking refuge. Besides this, I remember Mother Laura extending hospitality to one of our Sister's mother and sister with her children, giving them board and lodging for a long time.

Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak reiterating the above, added:

Mother Laura wanted the porter to be paid more, because, she said, 'he has to work hard to earn a living'. She would then send the nurses also to treat those who were seriously ill because during the time of war there were no doctors. She also sought to send even the chaplain to conduct religious services.

Mr. Tadeuz Aleksandrowicz stayed at Laurów for few months. At that time he was able to observe several interesting things. He saw a group of nearly thirty girls receive board and lodging in Laurów after the bombardment of Vilnius. On the same occasion he saw also the mother of a postulant and two or three lay people. One day he happened to see a freshly hunted hare, not simply running but taking flight. They had just gifted it to Mother Laura and she offered it to people who had nothing.¹⁹⁴

True, the Russians had driven out the Germans. But the deportations already mentioned, simply took another direction. As always, the main victims were the Poles. The sinister voices that suggested the existence of extermination camps spread. The colour of the flags changed, but the human madness, creator of hellish pain, did not change.

However, it was difficult to get reliable information. The Sisters who were still under Nazi rule were shrouded by a black veil.

As has been stated earlier, Sr. Matylda Sikorska, the first vocation received by Mother Laura and who would later continue her work as the provincial, had found refuge in the school of the Salesians in Krakow. She served as the reference point for the Sisters of some communities who were in Nazi territory. Mother

¹⁹⁴ Cf. *Summarium* 131, 142, 284.

Laura, however, did not succeed in communicating with her. There is only one letter that reached its destination.

6/10/1944

I think you are a true instrument of God to give only joy and happiness to the others, because, besides the very consoling contents of your letter, I must tell you that it has taken away my grave concern for you, for the moment I began to write to you full of preoccupations and premonitions about your situation, the postman brought me your letter.

So, you are doing well. We immensely thank God the Creator and Giver of every good thing! I am at a loss for words to express the joy and relief I feel on reading your account of yourself. Oh, that a similar atmosphere may reign in all the other houses also! This enthusiasm of tending toward holiness is worthy of imitation and I thank you for the care and love you have for my nieces.

*In your rather serious and difficult situations, your news gives me comfort. I think and believe that it is your prayer which calms the storm that threatens us and which is abating a little.*¹⁹⁵



During that summer of extreme suffering, on August 1, 1944 at 5PM a great uprising took place in Warsaw. It was an insurrection of Poles against the German invaders. They wanted to anticipate the arrival of the Red Army, which was so close to the right bank of the river Vistula that their encampments could be seen from the rooftops of houses. At the same time, they hoped to obtain freedom and the much longed for independence for their great and prosperous city, which was the symbol and heart of all that martyred country.

They trusted in the help of the Russians, but were bitterly disappointed. The Soviet troops did not move a finger to help.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. 364.

The 45,000 Polish soldiers of General Komorowski were animated by great patriotism, but their weapons were scarce. They could have succeeded only with adequate help. Although the Germans were besieged on all sides, those present in the battle were much better armed. In addition, new troops arrived and unleashed all their furious anger.

The population found itself in an inconceivable situation, enemies to the right and to the left, hunger and death. The notorious Heinrich Himmler gave the order to the SS soldiers to kill mercilessly, without regard for men, women, children, doctors or religious no matter what kind of works of mercy they were involved in. Houses were bombarded and burned. It did not matter to them if there were living and thinking human beings inside. They were to be destroyed, razed to the ground and the footprints of the glorious Nazi spiked boots capable of fiercely trampling life, were to be imprinted forever and ever.

On October 2, the Polish patriots surrendered. According to the Geneva Convention, the captured insurgents and civilians were considered to be prisoners of war but only temporarily, because Hitler's order to apply the Final Solution to the entire city of Warsaw was expected at any time.

In fact, the order came and it was a total desolation. The Soviet 'liberators' arrived only in January 1945, after everything was finished.

Already on October 3, 1944 the Polish nationalist government in exile in London, fully determined not to give in to any kind of invader, had issued a statement of scorching protest that said, among other things, "We refrain from making judgments on this tragedy, but may the justice of God pronounce a verdict on the terrible error that the Polish nation has had to endure, and may he punish its architects".¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Many officers and soldiers who had escaped capture in 1939 remained loyal to the, "government in exile". Some succeeded in taking refuge in Palestine, others, instead, gathered in a clandestine troop that took the name of the Polish National Army, under the command of General Komorowski, nicknamed, Bor.

In early January 1945, in the midst of the rubble of Warsaw a new interim government was formed. It was supported by the Soviets and would soon lead to the establishment of the Polish People's Republic with a communist regime. At this juncture it was no longer possible to rely on the previous, "government in exile". In February, while the war was already drawing to an end as a result of ever-greater Nazi defeats, the chief representatives of the victorious powers: Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, heads of the governments of the United States, United Kingdom and the Soviet Union respectively, met at Yalta, on the Black Sea. The French leader, Charles de Gaulle, to his great irritation, was not invited.

In this Yalta Conference, the foundations for the future territorial settlements were laid, leaving the definition of the details for subsequent meetings.

In April, after the fall of Frankfurt on the river Oder, Berlin was surrounded. On May 2, two days after Hitler's suicide, the defenders of the city were defeated. On Tuesday, May 8, 1945, the end of the Third Reich was declared.

The following morning at Laurów, 'Mr. Jonas' who had been listening to his little radio during the night, whispered softly in Mother Laura's ear, as he was preparing to celebrate Mass in the secrecy of a storage room, "The war is over. Let us thank the Lord".

The Potsdam Conference, East Germany, July 17-August 2, 1945, from which France was still excluded, set the rivers Oder and Nysa as western frontiers for Poland and established that the German population living to the east of this geographical line was to be transferred by edict to the German empire. The eastern borders along the river Bug, instead, had already been established

However, they remained inactive for a long time both because they did not have adequate arms and because their every action was bound to cause bloody Nazi reprisals against the civilians. In 1944, when Hitler's defeat was becoming more and more evident and while the Red Army was advancing into Polish territory, these soldiers, in agreement with the, "government in exile", took on a very important role in ending hostilities. (Cf. website *Wikipedia*).

at Yalta. Lithuania was then permanently detached from Poland becoming in effect, a Soviet republic.

Long trains travelling toward hope

Polish citizens from the area of Laurów found themselves in a very bad situation. Among them there were also partisans hiding in the woods of Sakiszki. They risked being deported to Siberia. No one knew what would happen to the orphans who had been given hospitality by the Salesians and Sisters. Many of them were Polish, and therefore, at that time, foreigners. For foreigners, there was the possibility to opt for their country of origin, but it was difficult to depart.

The Polish Sisters also could ask for repatriation. They would become part of the communities already existing in the centre and south of the country. It was hard for them to leave everything they had built little by little in the northeast territory, but the thought that Lithuania had by now been swallowed up by the Soviet Union forced them to leave. And then there was the problem of the two Italians: Mother Laura and Sr. Maria Mazzoli, for whom the difficulties seemed insurmountable.

Sr. Maria Pytel spoke Lithuanian very well, and even a little Russian. She was now entrusted with sorting things out. She did it accepting the task wholeheartedly, especially and above all, because she felt supported by prayer and the presence of Mother Laura.

She travelled back and forth between Laurów and Vilnius with whatever means of transport could be found, or even on foot. She was exhausted by waiting in long lines but refused to give up. This lasted more than two months.

She was told that it was not necessary to make all those people leave, because by now, all that land, Poland or Lithuania, was in fact a single Russian homeland. Poland was a republic by itself, it is true, but that was only a cover-up.

The military commissioner responsible at the repatriation office was a seemingly rude woman, but she was actually supportive of the requests of Sr. Pytel. She was only waiting for the opportune moment. She was Polish, but displayed unfailing fidelity to the great motherland of the Soviet Union. She spoke Russian perfectly and, perhaps, her collaborators believed that she was one of them.

The travel documents of 106 orphans who were definitely of Polish nationality arrived and also those of the Polish Sisters and of the two Italians. The problem remained for some orphans who had no proper documents.

Another issue was that of the children born to Polish parents in Lithuania. With *Mateczka*'s blessing, Sr. Zofia Sowińska offered to remain at Laurów for the sake of these children, but was unable to do anything. Rather, for years she was banned from returning to her homeland.

Regarding the orphans who could not leave, Fr. Jonas Žemajtis, who is, by now, well-known to the reader, narrated:

When they found that their names were missing from the lists of those who were leaving, our students were horrified. They felt orphaned a second time. They went to kneel before Mother to get a blessing and advice as a remembrance from her. The farmers of the surrounding area, who could hardly detach themselves from someone as charitable as Mother Laura had been for them, also did the same. I was the last one to receive Mother's blessing; and I obtained it with great difficulty because it was she who wanted to receive my priestly blessing. I told her that like the orphans who were left behind I too, was losing my mother for a second time. *Mateczka* then took the picture of Mary Help of Christians from the wall, made a sign of the cross on it and handing it to me, she said, 'Your good mother long, long since, has already surrendered her maternal care to the heavenly Mother and I do

nothing but repeat that entrustment'. And she gave me the picture.¹⁹⁷

The *Informatio* describes the scene. "It was October 27, when Mother Laura left Laurów with the Sisters and the orphans. It was a true migration. Along with their luggage sent in an open truck to Vilnius in the morning, was a carefully packed picture of the Merciful Jesus."

The train was on the tracks ready to launch out into the darkness of mystery. It was a long convoy which wound like a snake; it consisted of fifty cattle cars that were to carry 1,243 Poles to the southwest, uprooting them from the land where they had built a great part of their life.

Among those train cars, ten were reserved for the people of Laurów. Sr. Maria Pytel was in charge of the accommodation and knew very well how to take advantage of it, supported secretly by the aforementioned military commissioner: a woman apparently tough as a canon barrel, but who was secretly a courageous friend.

The orphans came toward evening. The *Informatio* again stated that, "There was total confusion". In that confusion were also twelve orphans without documents.

Sr. Maria Pytel, whom the commissioner had raised to the rank of doctor, immediately had them get into 'her' special train car: the one in which they had to accommodate (unfortunately!) those travellers who had been labelled as having a 'contagious disease'. The guards willingly or unwillingly believed it and in any event, they kept their distance.

The orphans stretched out on the straw and immediately began to pray. Mother Laura was with them.

Sr. Bronia had brought Mother Laura's old armchair, the one she had already been using whenever she could not breathe

¹⁹⁷ *Summarium* 466.

because of her acute asthma. It was placed in a strategic position, so that it was possible for Mother to see everything.

But Mother did not look around; rather, she was looking within, where the Lord lived ready to pay heed to her invocations. And those of Mother Laura were fervent invocations asking for the freedom of all those travellers. Even the military commissioner had entrusted herself to that prayer, well aware that she was risking her own life and those of others.

In fact, on that train, in addition to the twelve children without travel documents, there were many other illegal immigrants: partisans, escapees, families. Some were even carrying deadly and dangerous papers and documents. If they were discovered, they would have been shot immediately; and then who knows what would have happened to the others.

At two in the morning they heard the starting whistle. The train set out into the unknown.

When they reached the frontier, dawn was breaking. The orphans were sleeping on the straw and Mother Laura was whispering a prayer. She did not even realise that the rain was penetrating into her cattle car and Sr. Bronia had fixed an umbrella above her head.

The train cars were opened, but for some reason, those from Laurów were not. The commissioner descended, smiling and proud to show her solidarity with the Soviet soldiers! More communist than Stalin himself!

She expressed her interest by speaking in Russian, fluently and pleasantly; she made friendly comments and offered them a good round of vodka. "To you, comrades! Drink and warm yourselves a bit."

"To you, comrade; have a good journey and good luck!"

Then the train started again and the commissioner had to resort to emergency care for Sr. Pytel to avoid her fainting.



The journey lasted sixteen days. It was frequently interrupted by serious disruptions, because the railway tracks had been bombed and it was necessary to divert the trains to secondary lines. Warsaw station, the destination of the travellers, had been reduced to a pile of debris.

They also had to stop three days at Olsztyn, where they ate the soup offered by international humanitarian agencies. Chocolate was distributed to the orphans. On the train there was a car where potatoes were stored. Whenever they could the travellers roasted them as they were, using the pieces of fencing or other wooden debris as fuel.

At each stop the children went in search of Mother Laura. It was like being in a family.



After the war the Sisters of Łódź¹⁹⁸ who had returned to their almost devastated home on Franciszkanska Street came to know that a refugee train would be arriving from Lithuania. They began to keep an eye on the station and finally saw Mother Laura appear. The meeting was full of blessings. Along with them there were also other Polish Sisters who came to celebrate the arrival.

Sr. Wanda Ziółkowska carried on her shoulders a chair for Mother, because she knew how swollen her legs would be. Alighting from the train Mother Laura sat on it. Afterwards, Sr. Wanda took that chair home with her as if it had become a relic.

Sr. Janina Waledzik always remembered the warm embrace with which *Mateczka* allowed her to feel renewed joy and hope. Sr. Zofia Paprocka said, "I was greatly impressed by the kindness with which she listened at length to all my vicissitudes and

¹⁹⁸ Cf. *Copia Publica* 2165. Unfortunately, from 1934 to 1945 there are no chronicles of this house.

difficulties as a young professed Sister. Her words remained fixed in my heart forever”¹⁹⁹.

"I'll come to see you soon", she said while saying good-bye to them; and for them that was a profound blessing.

Magnificent castles and bloodstained villas

Near the town of Leszno, at a good distance to the west from Łódź in Greater Poland, there was an old castle: the castle of Pawłowice which had been given to the orphanage in Laurów. Sisters, girls and boys would finally arrive there in mid November, probably on the 12th, after many days of gruelling travel and agonising adventures.

The castle was beautiful; the orphans could not take their eyes off the stucco work, the chandeliers and the paintings. They could not understand how and why it had become their home.

Overall, though, nothing else mattered; it was enough that the Sisters were there and among them all it was enough that *Mateczka* was there.

Mother Laura immediately entrusted the direction of the house to her most faithful former companion Sr. Maria Mazzoli who, forgetting her ill health, joyfully accepted and devoted herself to the education of the orphans.

Almost immediately, a letter dated November 26, 1945, was sent from the castle of Pawłowice. It crossed the Alps and arrived in Turin. It was addressed to the Superior General, Mother Linda Lucotti.

After thousands of hardships, we have returned to Poland. Thank God the houses at Łódź, Grabów, Kraków, Różanystok, and Przemyśl have reopened. We started two more, one in the German area that is now owned by Poland, that is, Silesia, given to us because the Germans had been evacuated from there and it is now inhabited by the Poles; the other one from where I am writing to you, Pawłowice, has been offered to us by the government. It is near

¹⁹⁹ Grassiano, op.cit., 197.

Leszno, in the prefecture of Poznań, and here 106 children brought from Lithuania are gathered.

It was the palace of a count who died leaving two sons who are in England. The government had requisitioned it and made it their own and now welcomed us and the children.

For the moment, there are two lay people in charge, one to safeguard the riches of the palace, and the furnishings therein. The other is a woman who is an intermediary between the government and the Sisters. She holds financial responsibility, but they have promised that this will soon be resolved so as to give the administrative responsibilities also directly to us. Already there is a Sister assisting her.

In travelling through Poland, I met some Sisters, and some local superiors have already come here to see me. I will soon be leaving to visit the houses and will keep you informed of everything. The Lithuanian Sisters remained there because they cannot get out of their country, but they are under the protection of Fr. Skeltys, the Salesian provincial and their leader is Sr. Ladigayte who has a very good spirit. For the time being Sr. Zofia Sowińska also had to stay in Lithuania for reasons of administrative affairs, but in a short time she will join us. [...] And now, Reverend Mother, I have to ask you for a favour, that you would have the goodness to repatriate the Polish Sisters who are now in Italy. We are short of personnel because the places they occupied are now empty and all the more so because the two Sisters who were sent to Russia and the six who had been deported to Germany have not been repatriated.²⁰⁰



It seemed that the accommodation at Pawłowice was finally good; instead the following year, in 1946, there was a new migration.

Poland, although not united directly to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), was actually governed by a communist regime, opposed to the Church and its interference, and

²⁰⁰ Dalcerrì, op.cit., lettera 227. In note 3 attached to this letter it states, “By ‘affairs’ she means trying to get the documents for those Poles who had not been able to leave”.

there, at Pawłowice, the authorities made their presence felt. The Sisters there were barely tolerated by them. They had given the house the indisputable name of the State Home for Children, as had previously happened in Laurów. The sticks they were trying to put between the spokes of the wheel of the daily educational activities, were far from mere twigs.

Everyone moved to Wschowa, a small town that seemed to guarantee an increased possibility of freedom. It was quite far from Pawłowice to the northwest. A few FMA, who had remained isolated, had already taken refuge there, during the last days of the war, and were able to gather a group of dispersed and orphaned children.

It was possible to transfer from Pawłowice the children who were still in need of direct assistance, either because they were alone in the world, or because their age did not allow them to earn their daily bread in that painful post-war period.



In the meantime, in the midst of the universal chaos that had been created, arrangements were made to settle other groups. News travelled with difficulty, telling of the sufferings they were still undergoing, but also carrying new seeds of hope.

- The house of Sokołów Podlaski was being reorganised and while its activities were still in the process of being reconstructed, they were potentially promising. Mother Laura heard about it while she was on a visit to Krakow, where four Sisters had lived clandestinely from the beginning of the hostilities. She was told about it, after a liberating embrace from her precious right-hand person, Sr. Matylda Sikorska, who had kept an eye on many things.

The four Sisters from Krakow also felt like they had been resurrected. During all those years, they had been well hidden, wearing lay clothes, in the Salesian parish fulfilling many tasks.

- In the absence of any news from Mother Laura, as soon as the end of the war was announced, the community animators of

central-south Poland gathered in Łódź. They drew up a plan for restructuring and reconstruction and submitted it to the Salesian Provincial, Fr. Jan Ślósarczyk for approval.

- Immediately, in the summer of 1945, they managed to open a house in Twardogóra, with a technical school, student hostel, and teaching religion in state schools.

- In different parts of Poland there were many young people, girls and children who, after a dark and bitter life, felt the need of a fresh start and asked to be able to come and fill the classrooms and the festive oratory. They were certain that there they could find joy.

One by one the dispersed Sisters were coming back.

- Some Sisters who had lived with *Mateczka* either in Różanystok or Laurów also emerged from hiding. They had remained in Lithuania, disguising themselves as workers on different farms. Mother Laura came to know secretly, that at that point they had actually returned to Różanystok, where the buildings were more or less usable and where the people wanted the school to be re-opened.

One of them was Sr. Jadwiga Mrugowska, who had been in Laurów first as a teacher, then when the situation changed she worked in the laundry. Another Sister already mentioned on a number of occasions was Sr. Helena Kwiecień. They had succeeded in obtaining the necessary documents and on August 2, with Mother Laura's blessing could, actually, re-enter that historic house loved by all.

As soon as possible she went in person on the difficult journey to Różanystok. It was a joy to restart that community under the direction of Sr. Zenobia Ogósc, who also started a clinic. Again it was Sr. Maria Pytel who had contacted the necessary civil and Church authorities.



Mother Laura never stopped for a moment. As soon as she could she started new presences, houses and works as requested and according to need.

One of her first concerns was to find a suitable place to reopen the novitiate. It was no longer opportune to re-establish the novitiate of Różanystok up there in the north, at a distance of just ten kilometres from the USSR border.

There were novices. They were the most courageous novices. They had remained faithful and firm as a rock, buried in a clandestine world for seven long painful years. They were novices already on their way to maturity, but their heart was all illumined by their 'yes' repeated day after day and kept alive in the consciousness of the gift of their vocation which they had received and wanted to give back resolutely.

Like the novices, those who were postulants in 1939 had remained postulants.

Besides, new, young candidates were also coming forward.

It was Fr. Jan Ślósarczyk, already appointed as the provincial, who came to her assistance with intelligence and generosity. He offered Mother Laura a very beautiful residence. It was a large villa which a German had donated to the Salesians from the origins of their work, and where they had established a school of theology for future Polish priests. Then, in 1940, there was the usual problem: the building was requisitioned by the Nazis.

Now, it is true, there were no more Nazis; but neither were there clerics. Many of them had not only put aside the cassock, but had also lost their lives in the torturous battlefields.

The house was in Pogrzebień, in southern Poland, near the Czechoslovakian border. It belonged to the diocese of Katowice.

The gift was accepted with much gratitude; and immediately a few Sisters went to clean and set it up. Among them were Sr. Julia Janus and Sr. Matylda Sikorska.

They were happy. They began from the top, with brooms, dust cloths, nails and hammers. They took away piles of debris, replaced the broken glass in the windows with cardboard and arranged some essential furniture. They moved down from the second floor to the first and to the ground floor. When they went down into the basement, they felt themselves overcome by anguish.

They saw instruments of torture, blackened blood stains ... and what else?

They went out and collapsed on the entrance steps.

Then someone told them what that villa had been. It had been a branch of the extermination camp of Auschwitz reserved for women and children.

That discovery not only remained marked by horror, but became the spark that ignited a fresh impulse for evangelisation, lived totally on the foundation of a new-found will to make life more humane.

Those victims were also remembered with a monument in their honour at the end of the garden.

The historic novitiate was finally opened. The letter sent by Mother Laura to the Archbishop Stanisław Adamski of Katowice, is dated February 16, 1946. The arrival of the community animator, Sr. Julia Janus, was marked on the calendar on March 28. With her there was a young candidate. Then Sr. Maria Pytel arrived with a novice.

On May 11, another arrival brought much joy: the money to buy a cow.

On June 7, they were finally able to celebrate a joyful feast, much more in the heart than in external manifestations. In fact, their dearest Mother Laura also came to Pogrzebień. It was not a simple visit, but a real transfer of residence, not only for her

personally, but also for what had by now become the Polish Province of Mary Help of Christians.²⁰¹

There were also tears, those shed in Pawłowice by the children whom she had left and who loved her very much. She had left the place physically, but certainly did not abandon them, because her whole life was for them.

²⁰¹ Officially established on May 16, 1946.

Chapter Six

PEACE, BUT WHAT KIND OF PEACE?

Beginnings of a new found life

The years 1939-1945 were one long period of horror, death, and oppression in an ocean of blood and tears. They were also years of heroism, of overcoming personal selfishness, of humble greatness in the total gift of self! Years of prayer, of hope, of invocation addressed to God who alone knew the reasons for pain.

At the end of those years in a certain sense of immobility, the whole ecclesial reality, which had been submerged and persecuted throughout most of Europe, returned not only to being visible but also vibrant with renewed fervour.

Regarding the Institute, on May 16, 1946, as has been noted, Mary Help of Christians Province was officially established in Poland.

On the following August 5, seven Sisters who had been waiting for years made their first profession. On the same day, in the parish church, twenty postulants asked to enter the novitiate. Later, in the house, before the historic painting that had followed her in all her vicissitudes, *Mateczka* entrusted them all to the Merciful Jesus.

Sr. Zenobia Ogórkówna, who had already been community animator in Różanystok, assumed the role of novice formator, replacing Sr. Cleofe Brogгинi who was still in Italy.

The novices who had returned to their families at the beginning of the war were all present to answer the new call from the Lord. The Sisters in temporary profession gloried in being able

to make their perpetual profession: thirteen at Laurów, four at Łódź, three at Sokołów, the other two in Krakow and Vilnius respectively and finally two in Austria at Klagenfurt.

Soon there was also a crowded oratory in the house of Pogrzebień which was entrusted to Sr. Leokadia Deskiewicz.

It is Sr. Leokadia who narrated that one day during the war she was surprised to see Mother Laura in tears before Jesus crucified. She was expressing the agony of her heart for her Sisters who had been dispersed because of the hostilities, those Sisters about whom she did not have any news, those Sisters who had lived through a whole range of overwhelming difficulties.²⁰²

In that year, 1946, she had the consolation of seeing them gradually taking on new life. On August 14, Sr. Jadwiga Dudziak and Sr. Wanda Brylińska arrived; they had come from Vilnius, the city which was no longer part of their homeland. They had been able to return to Poland with some Salesians and before leaving they were able to meet for a short while, the long-suffering Sr. Zofia Sowińska.

Then, on September 7, a telegram arrived that brought great relief. Sr. Cleofe Brogginini and the twelve Polish Sisters who had emigrated to Italy during those years were about to arrive.

Mother Laura immediately arranged for some farm carts to bring their luggage and set off for the Racibórz station, nine kilometres away.

The following day, on the liturgical feast of the birth of Mary Most Holy, there was a big celebration in Częstochowa, not only for the twelve Sisters, but for all the Polish people. Cardinal

²⁰² "I was passing by Mother Laura's room and I heard someone crying. Urged on by curiosity, I knocked on the door and entered. Before my eyes was this scene: Mother Laura was beside the table on which there was a crucifix; looking at him with tears in her eyes she was talking aloud to him. Seeing me she was somewhat confused. When I asked if she was feeling ill she replied, 'You know, Bronia just went out and I wanted to talk to Jesus'. I apologised and withdrew." Summarium 179.

Augustus Hlond consecrated Poland to the Sacred Heart of Mary. It was a real day of liberation. The sanctuary was flooded by a large sea of people of every kind. They felt that they had been resurrected from the depths of horror to the inebriating light of hope, of Christian hope, of human hope that constantly finds ways to relaunch itself toward a new tomorrow.

It was also a day of tears, because the names of those who died were there in everyone's heart like open, bleeding wounds, even if they were no longer as devastated.

After about a week, on September 15, Mother Laura expressed her great joy through a letter. The letter was addressed to Sr.Elzbieta Fujówna, who had been with her at Laurów and who at that time was the community animator in Przemyśl, in a Salesian house.

I hasten to share with you the great joy that we experienced last Sunday on the arrival of our dear Sisters and the novice mistress from Italy. You can imagine the joy on both sides! Now all have gone to visit their families and then they will return to work because we have much to do.

Why were the twelve Sisters in Italy? How and why did they go there? Certainly not on a tourist trip!

Here is what Sr. Stefania Aleksandrowicz recounted:

When the British advanced, we were taken to Italy, first to Bologna and then to Reggio Emilia where a detention centre had been set up for Poles. In December 1945, together with two others, I was able to leave for Turin, where we stayed until the summer of 1946. Then we were sent to Rome where we waited a month for the opportunity to return to Poland.

Sr. Helena Zaremba instead, had gone to Italy voluntarily. She had met Mother Laura in Vilnius in 1928, and in 1932, when she was twenty three, had made her religious profession in Italy. Later, she returned to prepare to leave as a missionary but the war forced her to remain there. Then, finally, in 1946, she was sent back to Poland, and that was her definitive mission land.



In those hectic times a large number of requests began to pile up on Mother Laura's desk.

There were already existing works, but they were languishing because the German Sisters had been forced to leave Poland as a result of the disastrous defeat of the Third Reich.

There was an urgent need to create new types of work, designed to lift the country from the horrors it had suffered during the destructive years of war.

Cardinal Augustus Hlond,²⁰³ the great animator, had returned from his long imprisonment and found in Mother Laura one who was ready and in harmony with him. Immediately on January 6, 1946, he called a meeting of the superiors general and the provincials of the various institutes in Krakow, and shared with them what the bishops of various dioceses had planned.

The task at hand was immense. Poland, like other European countries and a great part of the entire world, had been wounded to the core in its cultural and moral, as well as the economic and logistical uncertainties. It was necessary to reconstruct, re-educate and return strength and hope.

Mother Laura mobilised all the Sisters, who were ready immediately for any request.

²⁰³ Augustus Hlond was born on July 5, 1881 in the city of Mysłowice. In 1893, attracted by the fame of Don Bosco, he followed his older brother to Italy to become a Salesian. Two other brothers also entered the congregation. He studied in the Salesian houses in Turin, Krakow, Lviv, and then received his doctorate in philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome. He was consecrated bishop in the diocese of Poznań in 1926 and became cardinal the following year.

During World War II he was forced into exile. At first he went to Rome and led a strong defence of Poland. He then went to Lourdes where the Nazi police captured him and sent him to Paris. There they tried to persuade him to organise a Polish government favourable to Nazism, but he refused. Therefore, he was arrested by the Gestapo at the beginning of 1944 and dragged into Nazi prisons. After the liberation, on April 1, 1945, he was able to return to Poznań. In June 1946 he was transferred to the Archdiocese of Warsaw. He died of pneumonia in 1948. The cause of his beatification is in ongoing.

In selecting the projects to be launched in different locations, Mother Laura was very prudent, but it was a prudence totally impregnated with the Gospel. She was not frightened of difficulties whether bureaucratic or financial, nor those that could come from people who were disgruntled or hostile. The needle of her compass was always directed toward real and pressing needs of persons. She set out courageously, knowing that she was under the protection of Divine Providence.

New foundations

Immediately, in 1946, Mother Laura established four new houses at Lubinia Wielka, Nowa Ruda, Polczyn Zdrój and Wrocław.

Lubinia Wielka, now called Dobieszczyzna, is a village of about a thousand inhabitants, situated in the central western region of Poland, southeast of Poznań, along with many other pleasant villages.

It was the repatriation office that assigned the house to the Sisters. It consisted of a villa with a park, greenhouse, woodshed, and poultry yard.

Here, however, is the testimony of Sr. Maria Pytel regarding this:

I went to see the land and the house (a building abandoned by the Germans), completely devastated and partially destroyed. I also enquired regarding the surrounding environment, to take stock of the needs and expectations of the people. It all seemed almost unachievable and impossible to accept.

With these thoughts in mind I went to Mother Laura in Łódź, because in two or three days she would have to make a decision. I informed her of how things stood. After listening to me, and after reflection, she answered briefly, 'Let us open the house at Dobieszczyzna and we will try to meet all the needs of those people'. Opening a drawer in her desk she took out about 5,000 *złoty* and handed it to me. It was very little compared to what was needed, but Mother Laura entrusted me with the responsibility to complete the task. It was difficult to believe in the possibility of

achieving that aim, however, obedient to her directives, I went to Dobieszczyzna to open the new house. A great fear gripped me and I saw everything so dark. The house was empty, we only had straw mattresses at our disposal. Shortly after, however, the local people began to come to our aid.²⁰⁴

So much so, that in June the kindergarten started, and in July, the chapel was consecrated. In September they began the sewing classes with forty young pupils. A year later, the orphanage was opened.

The Sisters took up the direction of an orphanage in Nowa Ruda, a small town far to the south in Lower Silesia close to what is now the Czech Republic. Sad to say, there were always orphanages! Later there was also the opportunity to teach religion in state schools.

Instead, to the far north toward the Baltic Sea, at Polczyn Zdrój, in a rural centre of Western Pomerania, there was an abandoned house. The German Sisters had been there. It was neither ruined nor dilapidated, rather, it was well furnished and maintained; it was near the parish church. The FMA accepted it immediately and opened the sewing classes and an oratory. They then began preparations for a student hostel and a good kindergarten. Here the Sisters also took responsibility of teaching religion in the state schools.

At Wrocław, Breslau, in southwestern Poland, a large and important city, the capital of a region of Lower Silesia on the river Oder in the centre of a fertile agricultural area there was an ancient cemetery church on St. Jadwiga Street. The bombing had certainly not spared it, but it could be restored and made into a residence. It was also a very risky decision but Mother Laura based her courage on faith. Was it not necessary to leave behind the ghosts of war and rebuild Poland? In what was once the church, a university hostel was opened.

²⁰⁴ *Summarium* 128.

It was again the almost heroic Sr. Maria Pytel and Sr. Jadwiga Górska who took on the heavy weight of carrying out the assignment, however, they assumed it with a certain ease because everything was done on the word, on the trust, under the direct responsibility of Mother Laura, who was always beside them like a granite pillar: with her wisdom, her capacity for discernment, her faith, and her liberating love.



Meanwhile, Mother Laura had resumed her pilgrimages. She went to visit the Sisters, to see the houses and always sowed new seeds of hope, of apostolic zeal, of profound consolation based on Gospel certainties.

Thus, she came to know many things of which she was ignorant, and which the Sisters confided in her, to free their heart from the crushing weight.

Here are their memories of September 3, 1939, a date which they will never forget. Early that morning, at Grabów, they returned from the parish Mass and saw a great stampede. Why? War had broken out. They ran home to that house that had just opened during the previous year. They tried to hide something and prepare to leave. Where would they go? They would decide in agreement with their brother Salesians.

But there was no time. The Germans came immediately. They entered the house, and put the Sisters against the wall with their arms raised and pointing their machine guns at them they searched for everything that could be taken. After an hour Sr. Mickalska fell to the ground unconscious; and the tormentors left her there, without batting an eye. Then they sent her and the others away just as they were.

After three weeks of miserable pilgrimage the Sisters finally arrived at Łódź. Much later the community animator returned secretly to the scene of the crime but, by now, the house had become a military garrison and everything had been stolen.

It was there, that during *Mateczka's* visit on April 3, 1946, very early in the morning, while it was still dark and the house was closed, somebody knocked on the door. They were the two survivors: Sr. Kazimiera Dymna and Sr. Paula Rozek, the Sisters who while still novices had been deported to Siberia.

One cannot even attempt to describe their encounter with Mother Laura. Sr. Kazimiera, however, remembered it thus:

She warmly hugged us and raising her eyes to heaven said, 'O Divine Mercy, I thank you that these my daughters, for whom I had prayed so much, have returned'. After the first tearful sharing of our story, she sent us to visit our families.

The worst part of this drama was: during all that time the only news that had reached Mother Laura about these her Sisters was that announcing the death of Sr. Kazimiera. Obviously, she feared that the same was also true of Sr. Paula.



The year 1947 was also one of new foundations. The twelve Sisters from Italy had returned and they could also count on a good number of future professions. The cities that welcomed these new foundations were six: Dzierżoniów; Pieszyce; Środa Śląska; Prusy; Oświęcim and Wrocław.

- At Dzierżoniów, in a building owned by the Church, a kindergarten was opened that was a great help to the people. Evening courses in sewing, the oratory, collaboration in the parish, and the teaching of religion in state schools were also added.

- At Pieszyce, in the diocese of Wrocław, the Sisters took over the administration of an orphanage and dedicated themselves to kindergarten, and the teaching of the Catholic religion in other schools.

- At Środa Śląska they took charge of a crèche and opened technical courses for girls. They also started a cafeteria for workers who were returning to employment after the war.

- Mother Laura had gone to Wrocław to finalise the organisation of the community of St. Anna that had been

established the previous year, and while she was there she was offered another opportunity; thus the house dedicated to St.Jadwiga was also opened, with a second hostel for the young university students.

- At Prusy and at Oświęcim they established two small communities to provide domestic services in Salesian institutions.

Oświęcim was and is a name that cannot be forgotten. It is the name which, translated with letters of blood and fire into the German language is Auschwitz, symbol of supreme inhumanity.

Oświęcim, not yet profaned in its reality and in its name, was the first city in Poland where Mother Laura had arrived on that now long past November 5, 1922. Here she had been given hospitality by the welcoming SDB community during her journey toward the north.

The arrival of the Sisters also filled the Salesian rector with such joy that a few days later he set out to meet Mother Laura. He went to her at Pogrzebień with a totally exceptional gift: three postulants! As if that was not enough, he also brought a sack of sugar. Yes, quite large sack of sugar!²⁰⁵

In two years, the most difficult of the post-war period, ten houses had been opened. In the *Summarium* it states:

In the most difficult post-war times, the prayer and offering of Mother Laura supported our houses. Despite the difficulties, poverty and the shortage of personnel, we always worked happily and cheerfully. No one ever heard voices of complaint due to overwork, and thus the works continued to develop. There were also many vocations, fruits of the prayer and suffering of Mother Laura: always immersed in meditation on the Passion of the Lord and of his enormous love for mankind.²⁰⁶

Sr. Matylda Sikorska who wrote these words later narrated:

While I was superior in Środa Śląska, once when sudden difficulties arose, I went to Pogrzebień to ask for Mother's advice and direction.

²⁰⁵ Cf. *Cronica della casa di Pogrzebień*, 26 luglio 1947.

²⁰⁶ *Summarium* 67.

It concerned the nationalisation of our work. Mother listened carefully and directed me to a female lawyer in Katowice. The lawsuit was decided in our favour and the work remained in the hands of the Sisters. Thanks to Mother Laura's prayers we continued to work serenely, certain of doing God's will. This confidence helped us to dedicate ourselves joyfully to our difficult task.

Meanwhile, the sorrow-filled house of Pogrzebień, had become the provincial house and the novitiate and was growing in service to the local people. In addition to the indispensable kindergarten, the oratory, the ever more crowded evening school, and the evening courses in sewing for young women, a mechanic workshop was also opened there for those boys who could not find work elsewhere. Mother Laura also wanted to offer the people healthcare service which was badly needed because in that area there was neither a clinic nor a pharmacy. Sr.Leokadia Deskiewicz, a very good nurse, took charge of it.

This acute perception of the needs of others is emphasised by some voices of the time.

- Ms. Agnieszka Cuber:

At that time the Sisters' house was our home. Everyone, adults and children, went there willingly. The adults found good advice and help in their needs; the children a smile, a game, lively cheerfulness and a wholesome snack. Mother Laura was the soul of all this. It was she who took care of the many needs of the place in the immediate post-war period. Her love for children was really great; even when she was already seriously ill she received them in her room and allowed them to play in the adjacent corridor saying that she enjoyed that disturbance.

- A past pupil:

In those post-war times, when as yet there were no technical schools, it was Mother Laura, who, in her goodness invited me with one of my companions to go the Sisters' house to learn to cook. What I learned in those two years was later useful in life. Mother Laura came to the kitchen every morning to say a few good words or tell stories. She did not speak Polish well, but the cook acted as interpreter. To us young people she showed goodness without

measure and she never left without giving us sweets. At that time Mother Laura was already elderly, very feeble (two Sisters helped her to walk) but she never showed that she was suffering. She distinguished herself by a constant recollection. She seemed to live in another world. She never left anyone without help.

- Margot Łaska, a kindergarten pupil at that time, shared that when her mother was sick for more than two months Mother Laura sent one of her Sisters to assist her during the night and would not accept even a shadow of remuneration. This happened also when a farmer fell ill. The family members had already substituted for him in his work, but at least at night they needed to sleep. "When necessary any one could go even at night to ask for help. She immediately sent a Sister, who was a nurse, to the sick. She never said no to any need."

She gave generously to those in need during the difficult post-war times, when everyone, even the Salesian Sisters, found themselves in rather serious difficulties and true economic constraints.²⁰⁷

- Sr. Teresa Wojcik:

When I was working in the kitchen in our house of Pogrzebień, Mother Laura would come to me after Mass to give me a word that at times served me for meditation throughout the day. Here are some examples. Once she was visibly very tired; she sat down and said, 'I make myself comfortable while Jesus carrying the cross to Calvary could not rest.' After a pause she continued, 'This morning I meditated on how much Jesus suffered for us, and how he was despised and humiliated. He, who had come to save us, was crucified'. She was silent for a while lost in thought and then said again, 'We are like the thieves when we don't correspond to good inspirations, when we receive Communion only out of habit, when all through the day we do not think of Jesus, and leave him alone in the tabernacle'. Then, 'We, however, will always be faithful, won't we? Oh, let us love Jesus with all our strength'.²⁰⁸

- Mrs. Emilia Nowak:

With tears in my eyes, I state that if we survived during that difficult post-war period we owe it all to Mother Laura, who made no

²⁰⁷ *Informatio* 185, exallieva Marta Zimmerman.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 196.

distinction between whoever was Polish or German but with an exceptional kindness and generosity helped everyone according to their need. Her goodness to everyone was truly extraordinary, never before experienced to such an extent or in such a manner. She came to know about my situation and without any hesitation sent Sr.Leokadia Deskiewicz with many gifts for my children. From then on she did this every year on the occasion of different celebrations; I remember how the children went into ecstasy at seeing a basket full of gifts: clothes, sweets, food. [...]

To help me in maintaining my family this good mother took care of four of my children. She sent the two older boys to the Salesians at Nowa Ruda where for two years they attended school and received everything they needed. The two youngest girls spent the entire day with the Sisters and returned home just for the night. They received everything from the Sisters. First they attended kindergarten, then the oratory, and later, the sewing classes.²⁰⁹

Voices of profound humanity

In the historic year 1947, the Salesian world in Poland received a breath of fresh air, in the form of an important visit from Italy. It contributed to the feeling that the stranglehold of the narrow confines defended by weapons and barbed wire had finally come to an end and could be forgotten. To the great joy of all, Fr.Pietro Tirone, SDB General Councillor arrived. He had previously been provincial in Poland for many years.²¹⁰

His visit was a strong support to the Salesians who had experienced such great loss of young lives. It was of comfort and encouragement also for the FMA, whom he visited in their re-established houses.

²⁰⁹ *Summarium* 505.

²¹⁰ Fr. Pietro Tirone was from Monferrato, born at Calliano in the province of Asti, on July 25 1875. He became a pupil of the Salesians at Valdocco, Turin, in 1887, the last year of the life of Don Bosco. After carrying out various ministries in Italy he was sent to Poland where he was the first novice formator. Then for twelve years he was the provincial. In 1926 he became a member of the general council as spiritual director. He died in Turin in 1962.

As has already been stated, Mother Teresa Pentore had also visited Poland ten years earlier before the war had spread its deadly tentacles. Therefore, Fr. Tirone wrote these encouraging words to her on February 5, 1947:

Most Reverend Mother, the Polish province considers you almost as its 'cardinal protector'. This province 'threatens' an extraordinary development. Seventeen houses have already been opened and two more are to do so in a few months; and how many more could be established if only we had more personnel available! If our Sisters were ready, they could double, triple their houses. The Sisters, at least in the houses I visited, are well, work much, and are full of enthusiasm. Vocations are good and beautiful and numerous, so we have high hopes for the future.

However, just nine days after he had written that letter, Fr. Tirone found himself at death's door.

On February 14, 1947, he was travelling with the Provincial, Fr. Antoni Balawajder. Suddenly their car overturned. The provincial died instantly and Fr. Tirone, seriously injured was taken to the hospital at Krakow.

His hospital stay was long and Mother Laura saw to many things, starting with assiduous, competent, and generous care. Then finally, Fr. Tirone was able to return to Turin.



A few months later, from July 16-24, 1947, General Chapter XI took place in Turin. It was particularly important because it was held after the disastrous World War II that had cut off communication both near and far.

The previous chapter had been held in 1934. During those thirteen years, the number of Sisters in the Institute had increased from 7,082 to 10,168, and there were almost 900 novices.²¹¹

At that time, the issues facing formation and the apostolate were very great, due to cultural and social changes, and the progress of extreme ideologies.

It would have been a precious life-giving moment for Mother Laura to be able to participate in that impressive assembly as was her right and duty, but she could not obtain an exit visa.

Sr. Jadwiga Górka went to Warsaw more than once to knock on the doors of the powerful, but she did not succeed in obtaining the visa. Her last attempt was dated July 12.

It was a difficult moment. The heel of Soviet Russia weighed heavily on Poland. Yes, Poland was free and independent, and it had a communist regime all of its own. However, it was far from free of that great and insidious foreign power breathing down its neck.

There was widespread mistrust, and a struggle for survival, also because, due to Soviet influence, the Marshall Plan had been rejected since it was considered as ideologically and politically dangerous.

At that same time, in January 1947, there had been the legislative elections manipulated in favour of Stalinism. In that situation it was not really possible to build channels of communication with Italy especially with that part of it which had connections with the Church.

The house chronicle dated July 12, narrated the reaction of Mother Laura to the refusal received:

²¹¹ The number of communities had increased from 700 to 978: 517 in Italy, 135 in other European countries, 7 in Africa, 31 in Asia, 268 in South America, 20 in North America.

Mother Laura, with admirable adherence to the will of God, said her generous *fiat*, although this renunciation cost her dearly. Everyone was moved by her serenity and her confident abandonment to God.

She renounced not only participating in the sessions of the general chapter but also meeting with significant people: her surviving loved ones, mother general and the general council to whom she had so much to tell. In reality she renounced a life that was very much part of her being.

In autumn there was another blow for Mother Laura, the painful death of Sr. Maria Mazzoli. She had been ill for some time, but did not give in. She was even a bit hurt by Mother Laura who did not even try to get a visa for her so that she could return to Italy on the occasion of the general chapter. The doctor had strongly discouraged it, saying clearly that nothing more could be done for this Sister.

Only toward the end was it diagnosed that the illness she was suffering from was cancer; earlier diagnoses were always uncertain and incomplete.

Did she, perhaps, not know what her real situation was?

The fact remained that she still served as community animator of the house in Wschowa, established as recently as 1945 when the war was not yet over. This house was in western Poland.

Although she was ill, during her last months, Sr. Maria showed that she was still interested in all the activities of the house, especially regarding the many orphans to whom she had completely dedicated herself. Her body was covered with sores that caused her intense suffering. She endured everything bravely. She was always smiling, they said, in fact, that her face had acquired a totally new light.

Until the very end she was always willing to welcome any person including children who wanted to see her, to greet her and to speak to her. She was alert, attentive, participated in everything, and never missed anything of what was happening around her.

At a certain point toward the very end, in a moment when she seemed to be asleep, one of the Sisters present, thinking her to be very close to death as in fact she was, said softly to the nurse, "Would it not perhaps be appropriate to go to church to pray?" Sr. Maria understood, turned her eyes to look at the clock, moved a finger in a sign of warning and said in a faint voice, "No, it is necessary instead to go to the children, who are by now back from school".

October 22, 1947 was the day she entered eternal life.

Another one of those 'sentries of the morning', those courageous women who were the first FMA pioneers in Poland was Sr. Cleofe Broggini. In 1925, at the age of twenty-nine she arrived in Rózanystok, and was the first novice formator giving a vital contribution with her whole being to helping the Institute take root in Polish soil.

The alarming signs of her decline became obvious toward the end of 1947.

They were celebrating the first Christmas after the founding of the new province. When Mother Laura broke the *opłatek*, the host of peace, there were many Sisters around her in festive and hopeful mode. Sr. Cleofe was very thin; her cheeks were flushed. This was not a good sign. However, she seemed not to understand and went ahead as if it were nothing.

By February she was vomiting blood. It was an advanced case of tuberculosis, which would require a surgical intervention to her lungs. However, because of a severe heart condition they could not operate. What could be done?

Mother Laura immediately had one of her best nurses, Sr. Helena Zaremba, remain close to her and took great pains to call for specialists to visit her and provide her with diagnostic and therapeutic assistance.

There was a huge issue. Sr. Cleofe did not understand the severity of her illness. She believed that she was well enough and thought that a minor operation would solve everything. It seemed

to her, however, that Mother Laura did not want it. Sr. Cleofe became very agitated and harsh in her words to Mother Laura.

Sr. Maria Pytel spoke of this fact at the canonical Process as follows:

I remember once, I happened to go to Pogrzebień to meet with Mother Laura and I realised that she had some inner suffering. She seemed sad and distressed. I came to know that there had been conflict between her and the Novice Mistress, Brogini. She only told me that the Sister was ill and asked me to go to visit and console her. She did not say a single word about that conflict. Only through a Sister of the community did I come to know that Sr. Cleofe was voicing strong objections and reprimanding Mother Laura who, though feeling the pain, accepted everything with great peace.

However, Mother Laura returned to the issue with the doctor who categorically stated, "No, Mother, her heart will not withstand the surgery. The situation could be reviewed after two months of treatment".

During those two months Mother Laura also fell ill because she, too, had pulmonary complications, but they were not as serious. The house chronicle of March 28, 1948 stated, "Even though she was ill, our Mother dealt with all the business and received the superiors, while the novice mistress was getting worse."

In April it was decided to send Sr. Cleofe to Krakow to present her case to a new specialist but after ten days this doctor also decisively ruled out the operation. However, he thought that a return to her native climate in Italy, would perhaps help her to somewhat recover.

It was not easy, even at that time, to obtain an exit visa. For the nurse who was to accompany Sr. Cleofe, however, it was definitely denied.

The Salesians came to their aid. One of them, who had obtained a visa for the purpose of studies, undertook the task of assisting Sr. Cleofe during the uncomfortable journey.

They left on June 4, 1948. They travelled in first class and the two accompanying Sisters remained on the train with them as far as the border. At Udine two Italian Sisters, having been informed by telegram, welcomed Sr. Cleofe and accompanied her to Turin.

Meanwhile, Sr. Cleofe had understood and had begun to prepare herself for a very different journey.

She was sent to the house called Villa Salus, but did not remain there for long. On December 13, 1948 the Lord received her into his merciful embrace. Ten days later, Mother Teresa Pentore, the only member of the general council who, until then, had ever been in Polish territory, also died in Turin.

Sr. Wanda Ziółkowska, who was already the assistant, was chosen to replace Sr. Cleofe as a guide to the thirty-five novices of that year.

She was the one who, during the dramatic journey at the end of the war, had brought a chair to the station in Łódź for Mother Laura, and then preserved it as a treasure.

In 1931, as a young girl she did have some concerns about that community animator, after seeing a rather serious picture of Mother Laura in the Salesian Bulletin. "No; I do not want a superior like this." Later on, she discovered her exceptional motherliness and came to consider her definitely as 'a saint'.

Sr. Wanda recalled some incidents. Once, during the absence of Mother Laura, the Sisters put her well framed picture on a chair, not to pray to her like Our Lady, but to remind themselves of her fundamental teachings.

Another time, during the morning, Mother Laura called her and said, "Go to Mr. Gorywoda and tell him in my name that he will not fall into the danger he feared. I suffered for his sake all through the night, and now I'm sure he can be at peace". In fact, that is what happened.

An insidious persecution

Meanwhile, the political situation with its social, educational and religious implications was becoming darker.

In January 1948, the waters were becoming muddier than ever before. The nationalisation of all schools was being planned including even the new ones which had been opened at the request of local bishops.

The famous Polish historian, and Catholic social activist, Oskar Halecki wrote these words, "The Polish Communists and their Soviet masters avoided the mistake of openly attacking the Catholic Church and unleashing a direct persecution against it, especially during the first years after the war". However, they did resort to a series of encroachments and to devious means to obtain their aim at least partially. These devious means also included the infiltration of spies who were unlikely to be suspected among those bishops who were most hated by the regime.

There were inevitable anxieties in the FMA communities. The community animators went to pour their worries into the heart of *Mateczka* and she, in turn, handed them over to the Heart of the Lord Jesus. She kept in constant communication with the Bishop, Stanislaw Adamski, who later, in 1952, was arrested, simply because he was one of those glorious prelates who had never sold out to the Polish Communists and their Soviet masters.

Thus, Sr. Matylda Sikorska, then in charge of the community of Środa Śląska, was able to contact a very capable lawyer who managed to save the schools from being nationalised. Sr. Matylda commented, "We continued to work serenely, and I would say, certain of doing the will of God, thanks to Mother's prayers. This confidence helped us to devote ourselves willingly to our difficult task".²¹²

²¹² *Summarium* 67.

In an Easter letter to the Sisters, Mother Laura wrote:

*May the Risen Jesus fill your hearts with his ardent love. [...] May he surround our whole Institute in Poland, every house and every one of you with his powerful protection of which we are in special need this year. May he deign to preserve us from all misfortune. [...] However, to obtain such graces it is necessary not only to pray ardently, but to do everything possible to deserve them. First of all, let us seek to renew in ourselves the zeal that might have been weakened by external chaos or by the tendency to autonomy.*²¹³

Let us make strong resolutions at the feet of the Risen Christ:

- 1. to seek God, his glory and the good of souls, unconditionally sacrificing our comfort, our strength, our everything;*
- 2. to observe the Holy Rule exactly and with love, even in the smallest things;*
- 3. to practise gentle, helpful love toward our neighbour, but always in submission to obedience;*
- 4. to practise humility which comes from the knowledge of our own nothingness and stimulates us to the practice of a prompt, joyful obedience without criticism or resistance.*

If this seems too difficult, let us look at the example given to us by our divine Bridegroom: obedience from birth to death, even death on a cross. Let us endure serenely the sufferings we encounter in daily life and not flee from them because they are the precious pearls that God gives to chosen souls; they are the signs of his love for us. The soul thus becomes nobler, like gold refined by fire. Sufferings are the proof of our love for God; they unite us to him more closely so that we desire nothing more than to serve God.



In the face of the difficult socio-political situation of the country, Cardinal Hlond did not remain silent. In 1948 with much publicity he launched a penitential campaign to implore the Divine Mercy for suffering Poland and especially for the priests who, in the midst of many pastoral restrictions felt that they had failed in their vocation. He called on religious institutes in particular, to take

²¹³ Ibid. 386.

part in this campaign of continuous round-the-clock prayer. The order of participation was decided by drawing names at random. The forms of prayer suggested were: adoration, fasting, Way of the Cross, and the Prayer to the Divine Mercy.

For the community of Pogrzebień, the first turn during the year of 1948 fell between September 20-21.

This is what Mother Laura said:

For my part, I recommend that you do everything possible so as not to break a chain of prayer already begun by other institutes. I think for such a holy purpose one can sacrifice a few hours, even at great cost. I understand that only in the novitiate can one have adoration all the time. In the houses where there is much work and the Sisters are few, there will be some difficulties, but with good will, we can organise ourselves with the help of the resident girls, if there are any, and the women whom we know to be trustworthy. During the night let the Sisters take turns to adore, even if they are only five, taking turns, for example, every two hours. In the houses where the work and the conditions permit and where there are no classrooms next to the chapel, one can have adoration before the Blessed Sacrament exposed, even during the night, otherwise, have the adoration before the Blessed Sacrament in the closed tabernacle. If the letter is received late please begin the adoration immediately after receiving it and in the month of December at the set time, that is, on the night between December 20-21 and all through the entire day on the 21. During these days of prayer and penance let us all unite ourselves spiritually forming one heart and one soul before the throne of the Merciful God.²¹⁴



There is another letter from Mother Laura to all, dated November 20, 1948, which could be seen either as being in contrast with the above or as a logical continuation of it.

²¹⁴ *Summarium* 388; (Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 33).

The common denominator is this, *"Have full confidence in the Divine Mercy. Let us pray for God's mercy for us and for the whole world."*

The objective of the second letter was this, *"Have secular clothing always ready to wear when we can no longer use our religious habit."* Yes, because, *"not everyone looks favourably at those in a religious habit"*.

This decision was made not because of more or less questionable choices, but because of the emergence of a persecution.

Because of the need caused by present special situations I am compelled dear Sisters to recommend that you keep secular clothing ready. Take it out of your suitcases, freshen it up according to need.

Therefore, they were to be ready like sentinels, but always to be religious, not only in their hearts but also in appearance.

Let your clothing be modest, simple, without affectation and superfluous embellishments as is becoming for persons consecrated to God. Let there be no abuses regarding hairstyles, which should be austere with no waves or curls.

Then again, at such dangerous moments one should not make decisions on one's own. Always remain in a 'we' mode of thinking, deciding, and praying.

*In situations where we cannot carry on with our work any longer, I insistently recommend that you don't look for work on your own; let no one do this without the consent of her superior. [...] I leave you under the mantle of Mary Help of Christians, where we can feel safe.*²¹⁵



October 21 was a great day of prayer and adoration for the FMA. On the 22nd Cardinal Augustus Hlond died.

Nine days before, he had been forced to give in, suffering from excruciating pain and had been admitted to the hospital run

²¹⁵ Ibid. 389; (Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 34).

by the Sisters of St. Elizabeth. He had been operated on twice, but then serious complications had set in, including pneumonia. He realised the situation and told the priest who brought him Holy Communion, "Remove from here all that belongs to this world. Now eternity is coming. I'm going, but no man is necessary. The primate will no longer be here to work with you; it will be God, God himself will guide you".

During those days, as has been mentioned, there was another death (December 23, 1948) which was deeply felt by the FMA living in Poland, that of the General Councillor, Mother Teresa Pentore, who with a great and loyal heart took an interest in them until the end.

As a student in Nizza Monferrato Teresa Pentore had known Mother Mazzarello. She also preserved in her heart the precious memory of a personal encounter with Don Bosco, who had blessed and encouraged her vocation. She made her profession in 1887, when he was still alive.

She became a member of the general council in 1924, and was re-elected several times. She was sent as a visitor to almost every part of the world at a time when travel was certainly much more difficult than at present. In Latin America she travelled from Uruguay to Argentina, Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, Chile, Peru, Ecuador and Central America on a trip lasting for two years. Then, starting from the end of 1929, she visited different parts of Brazil, even entering the Amazon forest.

Certainly she did not forget Europe, but for her that was almost like being at home. She visited various Italian provinces, England, Hungary and, of course, Poland. Everywhere she left a Salesian witness of the highest quality, giving joy to the Sisters and a new impetus to the works and the activities.

When pneumonia undermined her strength, Mother Teresa entrusted herself totally to the Lord. The memento which she left to the Sisters was as follows, "Do good, do much good, and only for God".

The end of that year was difficult also for Mother Laura, who was gradually losing her strength. Despite this, however, with her ardent faith and her iron-like will, she continued her pilgrimage from house to house, to be near the Sisters and to be able to support them not only in their apostolic labours but also in the treacherous socio-political climate that surrounded them, due to the increasingly brazen infiltration of Bolshevik Marxism in a country that was so greatly opposed to becoming its representative.

The painful story of Sr. Zofia Sowińska

All this time Sr. Zofia Sowińska was alone as an FMA in far away Laurów. This weighed heavily on the heart of Mother Laura, who only received the most unclear and greatly delayed information about her.

In 1946, Fr. Jonas and the Lithuanian Sisters, with whom she had stayed before, had been sent far away from her and now were able to choose the location of their new home. Sr. Zofia, however, was unable to get any permission, neither a pass to leave nor permission to enter any one of the houses that had belonged to the Institute. She was given hospitality by a country woman and that was all. She was like a phantom, a person with no rights whatsoever, not even able to leave that land which had witnessed her great fervour in building it up and which was now clinging to her with a possessive grip.

Sr. Zofia prayed, hoped, and worked hard. She did not waste even a moment of those chaotic days. She taught catechism to the children and the young people who were preparing for First Communion and Confirmation. She also catechised adults who wished to receive the sacrament of Matrimony. She did it in secret, defying the sharp-eyed Bolshevik spies. She went, for example, to collect mushrooms and one or two children accompanied her and listened to her words of life.

As for her daily life, it was one of abject poverty. 'Mr. Jonas' also witnessed this during those rare occasions when he could go and visit her and he testified as follows, "My heart was breaking to

find her in that abject poverty; it was only with great difficulty that she accepted a little money from me also because she had to be cautious of the people around her”.

Being cautious about people around her meant including the woman who had first welcomed her and made a small room available for her.

Yes, because shortly after that, the woman, terrified by what might happen, sent her out of the house. She did not have the heart to send her away and allowed her to take refuge with some other poor people in a shed used for storing farm equipment. Only when the rigours of winter in those northern lands reached its climax did she allow her to enter the house at night.

Domenica Grassiano stated:

We ask ourselves how could Sr. Sowińska resist for so long; for years! She had lost everything but not the little case with Mother Laura's letters. Was she perhaps sleeping with her head resting on them? She kept repeating her words, 'Be faithful, humble, and fervent with the piety that comes from the heart and transforms our lives into a long and continuous love of God'? Certainly, only the love of God could sustain her during such trials.²¹⁶

There are five letters of Mother Laura called, "letters of the exile".²¹⁷ After the death of Sr. Zofia, these letters were found. They were very worn and difficult to read. However, they are worth reading even in the condition in which they have been recovered.

The first is a greeting card written for Christmas. It reads like this:

May Jesus give you the chance to be with us to celebrate these dear feasts. You will find hearts that love you and want to work with you and be in your company. I, more than ever, have been waiting for this desired moment for a long time. May the Holy Virgin grant it to us soon. May Jesus be generous with his grace, spiritual help, and may he comfort your heart. I pray and pray so very much for you,

²¹⁶ Grassiano, op.cit., 236.

²¹⁷ Ibid. 235.

that you may enjoy health and peace. Pray for me that Jesus may give me a little more health to be able to go to visit my Sisters.

Some of the other letters have the tone of answers. Evidently, Sr. Zofia had managed somehow to communicate, expressing all the anxiety that gripped her regarding Mother Laura's health and she hastened to reassure her thus:

Do not be anxious about my health. I am suffering much but can still do something. Be tranquil and pray for me so that I can always accept from the divine hands what he wants of me. I send you my best wishes; they come from a heart that has loved you and still loves you just as much as before, and with a love that will last until death.

At a certain point when Mother Laura was seriously ill and was close to her final departure, Sr. Bronia managed to inform Sr. Zofia who was very frightened, and expressed her desire to see the writing of *Mateczka* as otherwise she would be forced to think that *Mateczka* was already dead. The answer, in this case, was in two different hands, one of Mother Laura and the other of Sr. Bronia.

Here is what Mother Laura wrote, "As you see, now I am better, thanks to the good God who always helps us in everything and in trials gives us strength and grace". Then Sr. Bronia continued under her dictation, "I was delighted when I heard that you have an iron constitution. I hope that you will be able to maintain this so as to be able to do still more good".

A little further on Mother Laura resumed writing, saying that her eyes get tired looking at the white page:

I am old, I am unable to do all that I should, but for now I still have to steer the ship. I want to see you again and tell you everything that the heart of a mother can say to a beloved and much longed for daughter.

The fourth and fifth letters were written in pencil with much effort. Here are a few phrases from them:

It is I, myself who is writing to you. If you can read it you are really great. Now you can see very well that I am not dead but alive and I

long for you with all my heart with all the desire of my soul to relive the times of old, praising the Lord and doing a bit of good to souls.

Then communication stopped completely, because Mother Laura went to the Lord.

Only on May 3, 1957, six years after Mother Laura's death was Sr. Zofia able to re-enter Poland, with all her memories, with all her sufferings and with all the treasures of her very special experiences.

She lived for about twenty years more, until January 1976, carrying out also the responsibility of provincial bursar for a long time.

When she passed away, the Sisters found the suitcase in which she had managed to preserve the precious letters *Mateczka* had written to her, despite the many dangers and difficulties she had experienced.

Chapter Seven

TOWARD ETERNAL LIFE

The slow, painful decline

The year 1949 dawned. Mother Laura was always herself. She was always herself in her dedication, love, and passion for the apostolate. But no, her body was not even the same as it had been a few months earlier. It drew back. It rebelled. It was off track. It did everything in its own way.

If a list were to be drawn up of all its disobediences it would comprise a considerably long one, such as:

- painfully swollen legs, with noticeable difficulty in walking;
- increasingly failing eyesight;
- asthma and heart problems;
- strange abdominal pain that tormented poor Mother Laura by day and night.

Ummm, that 'strange' abdominal pain!

Yet, even in her deplorable condition, with great physical effort she continued to get up at four o'clock in the morning. Sr.Bronia cried when she recalled those days. *Mateczka* was making a huge effort just to breathe. She was perspiring much, but she wanted to overcome everything in order to be present at the Eucharistic encounter with the Lord and with her Sisters.

By this time, she could no longer kneel. When the Sisters arrived in church they saw her leaning against the altar in an attitude of profound adoration. Then, outside, they saw her dragging herself before a picture of the Merciful Jesus. She stopped for a moment, smiled and greeted it in all familiarity.

At a time when Mother Laura was absent from Pogrzebień a novice dreamed of that picture and it seemed that the Lord was saying to her, "You clean the stairs in front of me, but you do not stop even for a moment. When Mother is not here, no one greets me like she does".

One of those absences was for the foundation of the last house she opened in Kopiec in the diocese of Częstochowa. Those who settled here formed a very hardworking and valued community involved in domestic service to the Salesians. On that occasion, with growing confidence and conviction, Mother Laura once again entrusted all her Sisters, all the apostolic undertakings, and all young people to the miraculous Black Madonna.

However, at a certain point Mother Laura had to stop. She could no longer visit the houses. But, what followed was like the relationship between Mohammed and the mountain. If she could not visit the Sisters, the Sisters came to see her. It was a great celebration for them because *Mateczka* listened with patience as great as the ocean. She was available all the time since she no longer had pressing demands to follow. Even the most insignificant things could be said, although, in reality, for the person who is sharing, nothing is insignificant. For the listener, some things may seem to be so, but only if one is unable to empathise with others. Mother Laura could always empathise; she could understand the fragility, shortcomings, the sensitivities of different temperaments, and gave each a new breath of life.

To those who could not physically be with her, she would write letters and notes. She wrote to individual people and also to communities. It was good that the encouraging word should be read in a climate of sisterly familiarity, commented on and become a communal directive. This, too, was a help to advance along the loving ways of the Lord.

Her letters were simple, fervent, full of human closeness and, at the same time, as demanding as is the Gospel itself.

She assured others of her prayers and these were not empty promises because she profoundly and actively believed in prayer with her whole being. Echoing many other Sisters, Sr. Jadwiga Kung, remembers her, “standing before the tabernacle with her arms resting on the altar and bowed toward the door as she talked at length with Jesus”: for everybody, for everything, and each one.

The Sisters were suffering to see her declining health. They tried to help offering her this and that so that she could regain her strength.

Once, Sr. Matylda Sikorska brought some sweets to her. She had searched high and low for them. She wanted them to be delicious, pleasing, dainty, the best that existed in the whole world. But Mother Laura, who was always so polite, strangely did not even taste them. However, after a moment of reciprocal embarrassment, she said:

You need to know why I am not eating them otherwise you will feel bad. Well, I made a vow not to take any sweets during the war and then for the rest of my life. I made it to ask for the grace that no harm would happen to my Sisters, that's the reason.²¹⁸

Communication that sustains life

Recalling the letters published by Lina Dalcerci, the *Informatio* highlights some of Mother Laura's last letters, letters from a, “true spiritual teacher”.

The first bears the date of January 26, 1950, and is addressed to Sr. Zofia Buczak who had, a few months earlier, made her religious profession after a long wait caused by the war.

²¹⁸ Sr. Matylda Sikorska stated, “On one occasion I entered Mother Laura's room and she was sitting at her desk. She looked at me and after a moment said, ‘You know, I see your Guardian Angel, oh, what a beautiful angel’! She began to describe it. I asked her, ‘What kind of eyes does it have?’ ‘Somewhat green.’ She remained recollected for a while with her eyes staring at something to my left”. *Summarium* 62.

Sr. Matylda Sikorska, her future provincial, wrote this about her, "It is evident that from the beginning Sr. Zofia had received a profound religious formation, and this came from the heart of our unforgettable Mother Laura Meozzi".

The letter stated:

I am glad that you have a good confessor who takes care of your souls. In all calm, benefit from his advice, but do so with determination, and thus, gradually you will be strengthened in all virtues. The edifice of perfection is built during one's whole lifetime. St. Francis de Sales invites us to bear with ourselves and says that we need more patience with ourselves than with others. In your life you will see that he was speaking from experience.

Often repent not only of your own sins but also those of the world since Jesus suffered for everyone. So you will obtain many graces for many poor, lost souls who cannot find the way back to our Heavenly Father. [...]

Courage, my dear, little by little you will learn everything. The good Jesus will lead you happily through this earthly wilderness until the gates of heaven open for his faithful spouse. [...]

*Write to me in all sincerity about how things are, so I can help in what little I can, and know that in your difficulties you have a mother who understands you very well. Be cheerful! Jesus is always with you, in fact, in you. He follows every movement, every heartbeat that has to be for him alone. Love him with all your soul and you will be happy anytime, anywhere.*²¹⁹

To Sr. Helena Niedźwjecka, a young Sister who had been able to make her profession a few days before the dreadful World War II broke out, and who showed enormous good will as if she wanted to do everything all in one day:

Do not worry about all your defects at once. Choose one that repeats itself more frequently and, in this way, you will find your principal defect. Ask for light from the Holy Spirit in all your needs and he will enlighten you and will help you in the practice of good.

²¹⁹ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 143 e lettera141 (21 settembre 1949).

Do everything with calm and constancy and you will reach the desired goal, that is, holiness.

*Do not neglect the fact that you feel ill. Try to cure yourself with medicinal herbs to heal an illness as soon as it starts.*²²⁰

In this intense correspondence there were some Sisters who rarely, if ever, took the initiative to write, either because of shyness, or because they found writing difficult. But Mother Laura noticed them and their needs and desires whether of health, work, or even inner peace. Her pen raced over the paper, to reach them, to encourage them, or even to interpret how they were feeling.

*I have not heard news from you so I am writing to remind you that I am alive and thinking of you. I hope you will send detailed news in all sincerity and openness of heart as a good daughter with her mother who truly loves her. Just recently we began a new year. Let it be lived by you in the best way possible. Courage, my dear; seek to know the value of suffering endured for the love of Jesus Christ and it will be easier for you to accept it and to profit from it. May Mary Help of Christians be your teacher, may she support and comfort you.*²²¹

Sr. Monika Sylka was not old, but her community animator, Sr. Anna Juzek, was. The latter was one of the pioneers of the FMA presence in Poland and *Mateczka* wished her every possible good. This is what she wrote to Sr. Monika:

You have been able to return again to your Superior, with whom you related so well. Now I recommend in a special way that you care for her like your mother and even more so, as if you were doing everything for the Mother of God, and God will reward you generously because Sr. Anna is an older person and needs the care of a good daughter. You then be a good daughter to her. Every morning bring her a cup of coffee and in the evening a good cup of tea in her room when she goes to bed.

²²⁰ *Summarium* 370 (21 settembre 1949).

²²¹ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 183, a suor Bronisława Opertowska (14 gennaio 1948).

Make sure her room is neither too hot nor too cold, so that it does not affect her heart. Be lovingly obedient, serve each person with the love of Christ who rewards everything.

Again she recommended to Sr. Monika another member of her community, this time a young Sister in temporary profession who was weak in health and needed loving attention:

Regarding Sr. Smolińska try to give her something warm four times a day together with adequate food so that she can eat well and regain her good health. Act in the same way with each Sister when there is a need and in agreement with your Superior. Be a good sister and you will feel happy. Try to improve more and more in your duties. The more you know your responsibilities, the more easily and enjoyably you can fulfil them.

First of all try, to sanctify with pure intention your every thought, every feeling, every word and action, so that you may glorify the Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.²²²



Her letter of December 18, 1949, to all communities, is of great significance:

In a few days we will celebrate Christmas, which is the feast dearest to our heart. I would love to celebrate it together, all united in one house, and be able to give each one of you the greetings that overflow from my maternal heart. I believe this would be very acceptable to all, especially to those who have not been able to visit me and share their joys and sorrows with the heart of a mother who loves each daughter and therefore perfectly understands all their needs.

However, I am not able to satisfy our shared desire. But we can be united in a spiritual way. I will be with each of you in thought and in affection and in a particular way with the one who is most in need of my motherly care. Each one of you, try to do the same, that is, to be spiritually united to me. Then Jesus will be such a strong bond for us that we will certainly feel as united as if we were together at the

²²² Summarium 368.

same table, and in the same chapel, participating in the same Christmas Mass. With great zeal, we will sing the beautiful Kolędy to the Infant Jesus who comes into our hearts to remain forever.

Dear Sisters, may the Infant Jesus give you his abundant graces especially the grace of being able to observe the Holy Rule perfectly. May the love of God purify every stain from our souls and may sisterly love flourish in our houses, manifesting itself in every thought, word and deed. Then Jesus will willingly live in our hearts. During these festive days and especially at the Midnight Mass let us ask the Infant Jesus for his blessings and then let us try to correspond well to them. I assure you of my prayers before the crib and I recommend myself to yours, that together we can console the Infant Jesus. May God bless your work.²²³

Passing of the baton

Was this letter her spiritual testament?

Perhaps it was. A few days later, in fact, and precisely on Christmas Eve, another provincial was appointed. Why?

Mother Laura was exhausted. She was full of apostolic spirit, and motherly affection but she found it ever more difficult to move. Given the complex political situation, it was now necessary to have a provincial who was not only younger and in good health, but also Polish in language and culture and known to be such. Thus, Sr. Matylda Sikorska was nominated.

And Mother Laura? It is usually said about one who has arrived at the end of a career that they, “go back to the rank and file”. Yes, but what rank and file?

Neither the history nor the profound motherly affection of such a great pioneer could be destroyed. By will and decision of the superiors, the title of *Mother* was officially attributed to her without fear that it would obscure the one who had succeeded her in the service of authority. It was established that she would continue to spiritually follow the Sisters; all this, “thanks to her

²²³ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 212.

rare clarity of mind, her extraordinary memory and her wealth of experience.²²⁴



When she read the letter of appointment, Sr. Matylda, who was the community animator in Łódź, not only was she stunned, but also felt deeply distressed.

She rushed to Pogrzebień and, in the arms of *Mateczka*, burst into a flood of tears.

Mother Laura embraced her, calling her Mother Provincial and promising her unconditional help.

Many years had passed since that day before Christmas Eve in 1923 when young Matylda left her family and entrusted herself to Mother Laura to become an FMA! When she was leaving for the novitiate in Italy, in that now distant 1926, Mother Laura said to her, "When you come back we will work together".²²⁵

Sr. Matylda interpreted those words to mean, "You will immediately remain with me in Różanystok"; instead she was sent far away to Mysłowice.

Certainly Mother Laura meant something totally different; and now Sr. Matylda understood. It recalls to mind Don Bosco's words to the young Michele Rua, "We will go halves in everything".

It was Mother Laura herself who announced the change.
January 17, 1950

[...] I want to share the news received from the reverend Mothers, who in the last meeting of the Chapter, after taking into account the circumstances of the present time which are becoming more and more distressing, as well as my advanced age and the state of my health, have decided to lift the heavy cross of the responsibility for our Congregation in Poland from me and entrust this difficult task to Sr. Matylda Sikorska, the current vice provincial.

²²⁴ Dudziak, *Copia Publica* 476. (*Informatio* 197).

²²⁵ Sr. Matylda Sikorska lived until 1993, surpassing ninety years of age.

Therefore, when you receive this communication of mine, in all cases prescribed by the Rule, contact her who is responsible for our Institute in Poland. I highly recommend that you show her the same docility that you have shown to me.

*As for me, I assure you that you will be even more dear to my heart and I will continue to entrust you to our heavenly Help of Christians, to help us to fulfil with generosity the will of God that has been expressed in the decisions of our reverend superiors, and thereby contribute to the greater glory of God and the greater good of the Institute.*²²⁶

It is known from the memoirs written by Sr. Julia Musielak that sometime previously, during the retreat held at Dobieszcyna, Mother Laura had uttered a few words that, at the time, seemed to refer to the distant future. However, after the event, they were seen to have a more immediate significance:

I am nearing Him whom I have loved above all things, but you still have to stay on this earth to work untiringly. Remember that everything you do, you must do in such a way that it is acceptable to God. Always be willing to forgive everything at once, because each has her own limitations. Let us always go ahead because time is short.

The day came for the inauguration of the new provincial. It was Mother Laura who prepared it. She wanted it to be solemn and heartfelt. It was the first time that this had taken place in Poland. Up until that time, everything had happened almost imperceptibly, through day to day development that was at times happy, often very painful. They had started from nothing and now they had reached the point of changing the provincial leader for the first time.²²⁷

²²⁶ Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 213.

²²⁷ Mother Matylda inherited nineteen communities. There were more than 160 Sisters and 30 novices.

The communities of Grabów, Krakow, Łódź, Różanystok, Sokołów Podlaski were founded before the war; the others were founded afterwards: Dzierżoniów, Jaciazek, Kopiec, Lubinia Wielka, Nowa Ruda, Oświęcim, Pieszyce,

Sr. Matylda arrived at Pogrzebień notably late with regard to the proposed schedule. An unexpected delay had occurred with the public bus.

She found all the Sisters, novices and postulants there to festively welcome her. Standing there was Mother Laura. They had offered her a chair, but she, with a polite smile, had declined the invitation. She absolutely desired not to be an exception. She was like the others, why should she sit down while all remained standing?

As if she were a newly professed Sister, Mother Laura welcomed the new provincial with simplicity. Mother Matylda was so disconcerted that she felt obliged to say, "Excuse me, excuse me", as she entered the chapel to place everything in the heart of the Lord Jesus.

Mother Laura immediately presented herself to make a request. Could she remain in the house of Pogrzebień and stay in the same room in which she lived in recent times?

From the beginning this transparent deference became her way of life. The Sisters of the time vied in their testimony. When, in moments of community reflection, this or that topic was discussed, Mother Laura did not express her opinion unless the provincial asked. If someone spoke directly to her, before answering she would ask, "May I, Mother?" And that 'Mother' was one of her 'daughters'.

Sr. Matylda observed, "Each time I went to see her she would try to stand even though this cost discomfort and pain. I had to insist, taking advantage of my new authority, to persuade her not to do it again".

However, and precisely because she was not only allowed but even assigned the task, Mother Laura received the Sisters in

private conversation, taking an interest in them just as before and always highlighting their relationship of sisterly and loving obedience to the new provincial.

The letters of those days follow the same motif:

- *You shared that you have doubts about my affection toward you. My dear, you are troubled with a simple temptation that wants to destroy your peace. You have always been and are now my dear daughter and my true consolation. Be tranquil that I always think of you.*

- *I am always in poor health, but I accept everything from the hands of the good God because He knows what is best for my soul. I think of you and accompany you in your work.*

- *Don't worry about me because I will always be your mother who loves her spiritual daughters and will live and, as far as possible, work for them. You have always been a good Sister and worked as much as you could for the good of our spiritual family. Now, do what you can so that the souls entrusted to you, may find in you a great maternal heart that can sympathise with and celebrate the efforts of those daughters who wish to do very well, but do not always succeed.*

- *Mother provincial will help you in everything. For your part try to practise what she will recommend and so, helping each other, we will become holy and contribute to the salvation of souls. Offer your sacrifice willingly to the Lord and take up the cross your beloved spouse has prepared for you; carry it with love.*

- *Know how to face the challenges of every day and your soul will enjoy the peace of the Lord [...]. I heartily thank you for the prayers you raise to God along with your pupils. They help me to endure the pain that the Lord, in his goodness, has given me. My only desire is that I may be able to fully profit by this because it is a real treasure for me. So the days pass more or less in acute pain, but sometimes the Lord gives me moments of relief to strengthen my energies that I may bear my cross with greater love. Blessed be God at every moment of my life.*

- I understood very well all your sentiments and all that you wanted to say. I want to assure you that you are always in my heart, from which no one can take you away because you are my spiritual daughter for whom I wish true happiness and the holiness which is expected of a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.²²⁸

Toward the light and shadow of the Cross

The Sisters in Poland had a new provincial, and their pioneer a new obedience.

New obedience? Yes, animation, prayer, and the intimate offering of herself to the Lord Jesus, crucified and merciful. Very few knew, among other things, that Mother Laura carried within herself a foretaste of death: an inoperable abdominal tumour.

One of those who knew it was the Novice Formator, Sr. Wanda Ziółkowska. Mother Laura made no secret of her sufferings with her, but sometimes laughed and said, "See, I learned how to complain in Polish: *ohie! ohie!*"; and she did not want pain killers. Only when the pain was excruciating did she allow herself to utter a moan.

Sr. Julia Musielak attested:

When she was very ill she said, 'Now with this suffering I complete the offering of my life. Suffering makes everything nobler. The Lord suffered for our salvation. Even in such suffering she received those who wanted to talk to her and to each she showed her motherly interest.

Even the novices felt attracted by the spiritual strength that came from *Mateczka*. They gently pushed open the door to her room and approached her.

I used to go often to speak of spiritual matters with Mother Laura. Upon entering I always saw her recollected and immersed in prayer.

²²⁸ Expressions drawn from letters written at the end of 1950 and the beginning of 1951 to Sr. Maria Lipinski, Sr. Helena Kwiecien, Sr. Aniela Olczyk, Sr. Franciszka Matusiewicz. Cf. Dalcetri, op.cit., lettere 154,166,178,170.

But during the encounter, she was totally dedicated to the person with whom she was in conversation.

Although I did not understand everything because she spoke a bit in Polish and a bit in Italian, her conversations aroused in my soul a wonderful peace, joy and enthusiasm. After speaking with Mother I felt as if I were regenerated.²²⁹

In addition to the novices, Sisters came from afar:

- In those days one had to travel on foot from Racibórz to Pogrzebień, but to meet with Mother Laura this sacrifice was made with joy. For our return, she asked the community animator if a cart could be provided. She had a very gentle heart that sensed the needs of others.

- Even when she was very ill and bedridden, as soon as she saw a Sister who came from somewhere else, she would ask, 'Have you already eaten? Do you have a bed where you can sleep? Come tomorrow and we will talk'.

- For Mother Laura, our perseverance and faithfulness, despite seven years with our families during the war, was a source of great joy. Unfortunately, her condition continued to worsen, but she bore everything with serenity for love of God. I vividly remember a phrase she said in a time of great suffering, 'O Lord, if I did not need this poor heart to love you, I would remove it'.²³⁰

Having just arrived in Pogrzebień in 1950 Sr. Henryka Romanska declared:

Mother Laura wanted to know all the new arrivals and I, too, wanted to get to know her. I do not know how to describe the attitude with which she prayed, but it made a deep impression on me. After her death I was afraid I would not make my profession because I had a stomach ulcer. The novice mistress suggested that I made a novena

²²⁹ Testimonies of Sr. Leokadia Duszyńska and Sr. Michalina Gacek, in *Informatio* 200.

²³⁰ Testimonies of Sr. Janina Ziarko, Sr. Helena Zaremba, Sr. Władysława Radziszewka, in *Summarius* 498, 242, 486.

praying at the tomb of *Mateczka*. Well, having finished the novena, the x-ray showed that there was no longer any ulcer.²³¹



When spring came in that historic 1950, Mother Matylda gathered the Sisters. She wanted to have Mother Laura feel the affectionate and vibrant gratitude not only of the province, but also from all of Poland, because in Poland she had planted the seed and that seed had suffered greatly but now had sprouted.

Many came to Pogrzebień led by the community animators and with them many Sisters: all those who were able to make it, bearing the journey and overcoming the distance.

But one community was not present, that of Przemyśl in the southeast on the Ukrainian border. It is not known why Sr. Elżbieta Fujówna, Sr. Maria Oleksińska and Sr. Zofia Lesisz did not arrive.

Mother Laura also wanted to reach these Sisters and after the celebration she wrote a letter dated April 30:

I received your wishes. At our gathering all the community animators were there except you, Sr. Elżbieta. It was a shame that you were prevented from coming and could not participate in the beautiful feast that the Lord granted us to enjoy together.

And to the community she wrote:

*I was with you in spirit because only your community was not represented. Be assured that the Lord sees everything and if your sacrifice is offered for his love, He will grant you abundant graces.*²³²

On the occasion of this celebration Mother Laura wanted to have the children near her. She invited them into her room, even if their presence made her breathing difficult. She let them say what they wanted and she showed interest in everyone.

²³¹ Grassiano, op.cit., 230.

²³² Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 194.

Then, in the second half of June 1950, she was invited to participate in the retreat that was held in Lubinia Wielka, Dobieszczyzna. The Sisters wanted her there. They wanted to have her with them, to see her, to talk to her, and to be interiorly enriched by her presence.

At recreation they bombarded her with questions and she looked to the provincial to ask permission to speak before answering. The Sisters were moved because of her transparency and spontaneity without the slightest pretence of a false humility.

During her return journey, Mother Laura asked if she could pray in the shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Twardogóra. This was an hour and a half distant by car from Wielka. They say that it was the only time, perhaps in her entire life, that she asked something for herself. She needed not to lose what little eyesight that still remained. Our Lady answered her prayer. From that time on her eyesight, while not improving, halted its rapid process of weakening. This state remained the same until her death. But which image of Our Lady was it?

It was that of Mary Help of Christians in a parish church entrusted to the Salesians a short time previously. It was a wooden statue with a recent, but rather special, history.

It had been carved just before the war and it was destined for a church in Lviv. In 1939, at the outbreak of the war, Lviv ceased to be Polish and was occupied by the Soviet troops. And the statue? Who knows!

Then from 1941-1944, the city fell prey to Nazi Germany where thousands of Jews perished. And the statue? Who knows?

At the end of the war in 1945, Lviv was incorporated into the Soviet Union. The Polish people were evacuated and the city was repopulated with Ukrainians and Russians.

And the statue?

It never reached its destination. It was caught in deadly bombings three times while remaining intact.

In autumn of 1945, when the Salesians were entrusted with the parish of Twardogóra, it is not known how, but it arrived there.

On December 7 of that same year it was solemnly crowned. From that time on it was almost inundated with many *ex-votos*.

Three hundred and sixty-five days: the steep climb

It was the end of July 1950. In one year Mother Laura would hear the Lord's supreme call. It was a year that was very difficult to describe. Tormented? Happy? Destructive? Full of blessings?

Certainly, it was all of this, and much more.

Physically, things were not going well. Indeed, they were in precipitous decline. There was the insidious tumour, persistent asthma, and problems with her stomach and kidneys. How could her heart bear all this?

Then, a ferocious insomnia assailed her. For Mother Laura every night became a vigil of prayer for everything and everyone, in particular for her dear Poland and her most beloved Sisters.

Little by little, it even became difficult for her to eat, just fruit juice and water, little else.

One or another of the Sisters or novices continued to approach Mother Laura and for each one she gave her gentle and expert words of wisdom.

The nurse, Sr. Bronia, grumbled a bit. She would have liked the inconsiderate Sisters to understand that *Mateczka* needed peace and quiet. But Mother Laura perceived this, "Bronia, let them come in. They have every right to come to me!"

There were those who expressed the desire to offer their lives in exchange for that of *Mateczka*.

One of these who has been previously named, was Sr. Elżbieta Fajówna. Here is the letter in reply:

I sincerely thank you for the wishes, the prayers and your availability to exchange your sufferings for mine. My dear, I allow

you to offer all for me except your health; you must preserve this. The good Jesus wants also to give me a beautiful heaven, however, I have to purify myself here on earth. You can help me with your prayers and your little sacrifices to obtain from God the grace necessary to bear the suffering that he, in his goodness, gives me.

Be at peace and rest assured that all will go well because creatures are useful up to a certain point. The important thing is that the soul knows how to collaborate with the graces that the Lord gives.

In this beautiful Marian month, try to increase your devotion to Mary Help of Christians. Ask her for the virtue of humility and strive to practise it. When you have this virtue in an eminent degree, you will acquire with it all the others and you will be very pleasing to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.²³³

Mother Laura was ready. She imitated the Passion of Jesus, which gave her strength and a certain hope of the resurrection. Even her rosary was centred on this.

Sorrow and joy: poles of saving love.

There was also sorrow and joy in the life of Mother Mazzarello, who on June 24, 1951 in Rome in St. Peter's Basilica was proclaimed a saint. That day was the last time Mother Laura participated in the Mass in the community chapel. From then on things began to decline rapidly.

The nurse, Sr. Helena Zaremba, who expressly came to Pogrzebień from Wraclaw where she was community animator, affirmed that in the last two months Mother Laura was constantly at the point of death, caused mainly by the abdominal tumour that became, "as big as the head of a child". "Her mouth was one big wound. Lymphatic fluid issued from her legs."

Sr. Bronia stated, "She was extremely patient, she never complained. She suffered unspeakable pain but she had freely chosen not to take sedatives. Sometimes she was unconscious for two hours".

²³³ Ibid. lettera 148.

Sr. Aniela Księżopolska and Sr. Zofia Gądek recalled some precious memories:

- Mother Laura said, 'Do not ask the Lord to take away my sufferings but ask Him to give me the strength to bear them with love'.

- I know you are praying for a cure for me, but it is all in vain; rather ask the Lord for many other graces that you and I need.

-When I can't take it any more I say: 'Lord, I can't take it, help me'.

-She was aware of her imminent death and almost longing for the encounter with her Divine Spouse and with the Blessed Mother.

The Salesian, Fr. Leon Walaszek, gave this statement:

One day she said to me, 'I try to be present to myself so that I can have the Holy Virgin always present near me. I try to keep alive my constant union with God and to treat the Sisters as spouses of Jesus Christ. I have no other desire greater than this: that Mary Help of Christians be always present among us, not sad but always glad and happy with her daughters'.

This priest was with her as confessor on July 27, exactly a month before her departure for heaven. On that day Mother Laura wanted to make the Exercise for a Happy Death.

In the afternoon of the next day, she suffered a violent heart attack and asked for the Anointing of the Sick. The parish priest, Fr. Walenty Kozak was by her bedside. During the whole ritual Mother Laura kept her eyes fixed on an image of Mary. After this it was as if she had already crossed the last frontier.

During one of those days, while all the Sisters, novices, and postulants were on retreat in preparation for August 5, the Provincial, Sr. Matylda was surprised to see Mother Laura in this condition. She was standing by her bed, with her head thrown back and her hands gripping the bedpost. Her face was purple, her eyes bloodshot. When she met the glance of the provincial, she said in a weak voice, "O Lord, what pain! What pain!"

They put her to bed and after that she continued to deteriorate.

On another day an event took place that was filled with light. Sr. Matylda, with Sr. Bronia, Sr. Helena Zaremba, and others were near *Mateczka's* armchair. As usual, they wanted her to feel their sisterly affection. At a certain point they saw her transfigured.

- What is it, Mother?

What was it? She was seeing Our Lady.

- Our Lady is looking at us. She has beautiful eyes!

- How is she dressed, Mother?

- I am not looking at what she is wearing. I am looking at her face.

It is as beautiful as the sun.

Earlier in this book an oral testimony was reported by Sr. Domenica Grassiano. Mother Laura was certain that forty days before her death she would see Our Lady. Was it a dream that gave her that conviction? Everyone can judge as they see fit, but the fact remains that in the summer of 1951 just forty days remained until her definite departure.

On Calvary with the Lord

Mother Laura expressed a desire on August 5, after the celebration of the professions and entrance into the novitiate. She wanted to sing Gounod's *Ave Maria*. She sang it notwithstanding her weakness. She sang harmoniously and with expression. Mother Matylda said: "She seemed almost to be in ecstasy".

In the afternoon of the same day Mother Laura was able to meet briefly with the newly professed and to extend to them words of great wisdom:

- fidelity until death;

- complete entrustment of oneself to Mary;

- observance of the Constitutions even in the smallest things.

Still on the same day Mother Matylda wanted to send good wishes to mother general and the general council in Turin. She asked Mother Laura for a suggestion, "Write to them about our resolution to be faithful to Our Lady until death".

The following are some phrases taken from her letters written around this time:

- I am very ill, always in terrible pain of which I want to fully take advantage to give glory to God in everything. I am alive thanks to the prayers that the Sisters offer for me.

*- I am happy that we will see each other soon, but pray for me that I may regain my health because I feel totally exhausted.*²³⁴

Then in one of the last letters she wrote to the province:

*I would like to write my wishes to each one but unfortunately I cannot do so because of my poor health. [...] Let us truly love each other and form one heart and soul in all our thoughts, words, and actions. May our loving Jesus always live in our hearts and help us to fight against the temptations of the evil one.*²³⁵

August 12 was a day of great suffering for Mother Laura, so much so, that the Sisters thought she was already experiencing an anticipated purgatory. This grave crisis lasted four hours and no one knows what she really went through. When she could she asked for prayers. They could see that her trust in Mother Mary even appeared to increase.

Notwithstanding this, there was much celebration in the house of Pogrzebień that day. All the community animators and a great number of Sisters were present. Why? The person of Mother Mazzarello was being celebrated since she had just been declared a Saint.

Bishop Stanisław Adamski went to see Sr. Laura but she could hardly speak to him. She had to be satisfied with clasping his hand and thanking him by nodding her head.

Nevertheless, the bishop was able to understand a great deal. He concluded his visit with these words, “Only a saint could live in this way with so much suffering”.

²³⁴ Letters addressed to Sr. Helena Kwiecien (August 8, 1951) and Sr. Maria Lipinska (August 19, 1951), in Dalcerci, op.cit., lettera 168 e lettera 160.

²³⁵ Ibid. lettera 214, 20 marzo 1951.

On August 15, feast of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, Mother Laura felt somewhat better. She would have liked to attend Mass, but, no. It was not possible; she had also to offer this spiritual sacrifice.

However, the Sisters had a surprise for her. Perhaps in the afternoon Mass would be celebrated in her room. Everyone was there around her and they heard her pray, “Dear Jesus, draw me to your heart. O Mary, help me. All for love”.

Then turning to all, “Dear Sisters, let us not waste time. Let us pray to Our Lady, she is pleased with us, blesses us and is always with us”.

She dozed off for a while and on waking added, “What a shame that I woke up, because now I cannot see the beautiful things I saw all around me. I saw Our Lady and the Child Jesus playing with her”.



The greatest suffering for Mother Laura in all this time was thirst, a severe thirst. At a certain point she was able to define it as being like lava from a volcano at hundreds of degrees centigrade. Still joking she would say, “The Italian volcano burns in the land of Poland”.

Yet, on that ground she walked with the sandals of Calvary. For example, Sr. Bronia remembered that at the vigil of the Assumption she was left alone for a minute or two. On her return the Sister heard:

- *Broniu*; I am very thirsty.
- But Mother, you have a glass ready on the night table.
- Yes, but I will not drink unless I ask your permission.

Pettiness? Oh, no! Such a sick person and a few days away from death! It was more a participation in Jesus’ thirst. So much so that Sr. Bronia felt tears well up in her eyes. She knew Mother Laura only too well!

Sr. Bronia knew that for her to drink was a sacrificial ritual, every drop a prayer intention. She would say, “I feel restored after taking this cold water and I think of Jesus on the cross who

certainly did not have it. Then in order to give him some relief, I say, ‘Jesus let us drink together’”. And she asked him to quench the world’s thirst.

A little while later, still on the same day of the feast of the Assumption, Sr. Helena Zaremba came to see her. With Sr. Bronia she saw a special expression on the face of the invalid and Mother Laura said to her, “O, Sr. Helena, if you could only see with my eyes how beautiful Our Lady is! What a gaze! It penetrates deeply into my heart”. Then she added, “How beautiful heaven must be”.

Sr. Helena Zaremba knew Mother Laura very well, not only as a person and a leader but as a patient. She was called to assist Sr. Bronia. Like her, when she was approached by Sr. Domenica Grassiano, Sr. Helena remembered with profound compassion that ravaged mouth in which no glass of water could extinguish the fire, and her hands were never delicate enough to deal with those legs full of sores.

While the dressings on her legs were being changed, Mother Laura kept a hand over her eyes drowned in an irresistible flow of tears, saying, “See Sr. Helena do you know who is sitting on that chair? There is a Sister who needs spiritual help. She comes here when you care for me. She asks and asks”.

“Helena, there is one of our houses where charity is not lived. That house will remain sterile and will be closed.” So it came to pass.

“Helena, there are pages of my life that will only be read in heaven.”²³⁶

The 24th was a day of indescribable suffering. Mother Laura, well proven in accepting suffering, suddenly said, “O Jesus, I cannot take this anymore. I can’t endure this suffering. Mary, help me, you who see and know all pain”.

Still further, “Jesus, may I profit from these sufferings. Mary, let nothing be lost. Lord Jesus, unite my sufferings with yours.”

²³⁶ Cf. *Summarium* 245-247.

At a certain point she turned to the Sisters, “You will see what great graces we will receive from Our Lady! Great graces for everyone”. Also, “The Virgin is pleased with every one of her daughters, from first to last, and she will never abandon anyone”.

On the following day, August 25, after another extremely severe crisis, she fixed her gaze on an undefined spot for a long time. She then said in a deep contemplative tone, “Now I see and understand everything. I'm happy. Thanks to Our Lady, thank you Jesus”.

During these days, the Provincial, Sr. Matylda was not among the people who came to see her. She had to leave on the 22nd for Środa Śląska where several Sisters were gathered for the annual retreat. Faced with the painful perplexity, Mother Laura had told her, “Go in peace,” and she added in a somewhat cryptic manner, “You'll be there for a while and here for a while”.

In fact, on August 27 Sr. Matylda received a telegram calling on her to return. Unable to say a word, Mother Laura greeted her with a nod. “She looked at me with such goodness that she seemed like Jesus on the cross. They were such profound emotions that I truly cannot express them in any way.”

Toward midday on the 27th they brought her Holy Communion. Everyone was around her. She seemed unconscious, but it was not so. If someone came forward, she immediately showed that she recognised her. If they suggested the prayer, “Jesus, I love you”, she repeated it softly, “with a smile”.

Then she turned to the group saying:

- I see you all. Sisters, pray for me.
- Viva Gesù, Mother.
- Viva Maria.

It was her last good-bye.

She smiled and followed the Sisters as they left on tip-toe to pray in chapel.

On the 28th as they were making the bed and she was sitting on her armchair, Mother Laura suddenly spoke ever so softly, “You

cannot understand how much I am suffering. It is like Jesus on the cross”.

Then she rallied and said firmly, “Let us kneel, Our Lady is here and blesses us”.

At that time the postulant, Teresa Mieczko managed to approach Mother Laura for a moment. She desired this very much and remembered it thus:

Just before Mother died I was able to obtain permission to stay near her for a moment. My desire to ask her for a blessing came from my impression that she was a saint. Previously, I had sometimes seen her at Mass in chapel. She was seated in a wheelchair and did not have the strength to move. But her face expressed such gentleness and holiness as to leave an indelible impression on me till today.

When I went into her room I knelt by her bed and kissed her hand. Mother Laura could no longer speak but she knew I was there. She had a gentle face, her eyes were half open. At a certain moment she raised her hand with much difficulty and made the sign of the cross on my forehead, thus giving me a blessing. She did this without my asking.

A few hours later, kneeling with the other Sisters and postulants, I prayed near her body.²³⁷

For the rest of the 28th, and all day of the 29th up to evening Mother Laura did not speak anymore. The Sisters surrounded her with prayer. The chaplain was there and blessed her several times. The face of *Mateczka* was slowly relaxing as though the physical pain was disappearing.

The provincial asked if she recognised her and she, “made an affirmative gesture, bowing her head with a serene and tranquil look”. Sr. Matylda shared, “Immediately she turned and looked upwards smiling”.

Then her eyes stayed like that, looking at the picture of Our Lady. Her hands remained intertwined with a crucifix. In reality she was dead, but those present did not notice it at first, since the

²³⁷ *Summarium* 333.

transit was so peaceful. The 30th had just dawned. The clock said 12:45AM.

At 4:00AM Mass was celebrated. Then, during the morning, when the sad news spread, the pilgrimage of prayers began on the part of a large number of people. Mrs. Agnieszka Cuber attested:

Many young and older people came bringing rosaries and crucifixes to be ‘blessed’ by the ‘saint’; they touched her hands and clothing; they nearly covered her with flowers. *Mateczka* lay in the coffin and had a beautiful appearance, as if she were a young girl.

Notified by pre-dawn telegrams most of the Sisters arrived from the different houses in shifts that were not easily organised. A great number of Salesians, past pupils, civic authorities, friends, and collaborators of all kind also came.

Many remarked on the youthful appearance that the body had assumed. Domenica Grassiano affirmed that the health official put forward some objections. “Here in your documentation there must be an error. This deceased person should be no more than thirty.”

“And yet, she is seventy-seven. Look at her passport: born in Florence on January 1874.”

Everyone praised her beauty, so fresh and alive. They placed her age at twenty-five, or even twenty. But what is more striking is that everyone unanimously said with great simplicity, “She is a saint”.²³⁸

Sr. Matylda wrote, “Mother Laura had such a youthful appearance she seemed like a queen ready for her wedding”.²³⁹

²³⁸ Here is one testimony from among many, “After the death of Mother Laura something amazing happened: the extraordinary beauty of her face that, day by day, became more beautiful and young as if the happiness of heaven radiated from it. Everyone: priests, Sisters, lay people touched her hands with their rosary or other things. My daughter touched them with her crucifix which she later kept as a precious relic”. Mrs. Agnieszka Cuber, Ibid. 305.

²³⁹ In a letter to mother general, it was Sr. Matylda, who recalled Mother Laura’s sufferings during her last illness, “... for six months she had nephritis, with severe pains in her kidneys, no appetite for any kind of food, [...] an indefinable

A few special episodes happened. Here is one.

Sr. Stanisława Gawron (*Stasia*, to her friends) entered the Institute in 1938, without being able to proceed to the novitiate because of the war. She remained with Mother Laura at Laurów, helping in the kitchen. She then made her first profession at Pogrzebień in 1947. On that occasion Mother Laura gave her a holy picture saying, “This is for your future final profession. I will not be around”.

However, in June 1951, when Mother Laura was already so ill, Sr. Stasia wrote to her. She wanted to meet with her one more time. *Mateczka* asked Sr. Bronia to reply thus, “Don’t lose hope, perhaps we will meet”.

Sr. Stasia said:

On the night of August 30 at 12:45AM, I woke up hearing papers rustling, like skimming a book. I was about to go back to sleep when someone took my hand and I saw *Mateczka* smiling at me. She waved at me and said, ‘Now I am well’.

The next morning Sr. Stasia told her Sisters, “Maybe it is because I am thinking much about her, but I saw *Mateczka* and she had died”. In that moment the telegram arrived.

The community animator, Sr. Maria Pytel, also heard the skimming of a book. She switched on the light and it was 12:45AM.

They left for Pogrzebień. The trip was exhausting. They missed the train and could no longer make the connection. On arrival, Sr. Stasia had an almost unbearable headache.

illness. For years and years she shared that she had a large cyst which had grown quite a bit and perhaps it came from an ulcer. In the last three months, she was almost constantly in atrocious pain except for some brief intervals. The swelling of her legs reached an incredible degree and the inflammation caused a burning sensation necessitating continual use of compression packs. [...] Having had to sit for most of a year, sores had formed; the same happened to her back so that no position was comfortable.” (November 6, 1951), *Ibid.* 517.

She spent her time during the severe attacks, which often lasted up to four hours, talking to Our Lady. “O Mary, I willingly suffer for your glory. Holy Virgin, give me the love you had. Mary, hold me close to your heart.”

Sr. Jadwiga Górka recounted that after a moment of recollection, she brought her near the body. She took Mother Laura's hand and put it on the head of Sr. Stasia. Immediately, yes immediately, the headache disappeared, "and never returned".

This episode was reported by Sr. Stasia at the generalate in Rome, on October 22, 1979.

And the funeral? It is regrettable to have to describe it with the usual words such as triumph or celebration. These sound like clichés. In reality it was something very spiritual, the certainty of a beneficent presence that brought blessings.

Objects that touched the body were not considered to be lucky charms, but almost as symbols of a relationship that not only continued but became more intense and tangible.

An amusing incident happened as well. Several Sisters went away with the conviction that they were in possession of Mother Laura's rosary. One began; she drew near, took *Mateczka's* rosary and replaced it with her own. Then others, unaware of what went on before, did the same thing.

There is no need to say that on Monday, September 3 everyone was at the funeral: the numerous Sisters from the various houses, the Salesian clerics who had come especially from Oświęcim, the two Provincials, Fr. Stanisław Rokita and Fr. Jan Słószczyk, the past pupils of Laurów, together with the people of Pogrzebień, with large numbers of children and young people from the various schools and associations.

In the parish church the Rector of Krakow, Fr. Wawrzyniec Kapczuk emphasised the strong and heroic relationship between Mother Laura and her merciful Lord and God and the immensity of her great heart, capable of taking in every problem and showing understanding for everyone. "For Mother Laura to live was to be Jesus Christ and to die was certainly gain."

“She was a Saint”

On the previous evening, at evening prayer, Fr. Słóсарczyk had said to the Sisters, “Now we can look with relief at this coffin, because our heart tells us we have a saint in heaven”.

On the afternoon of the 3rd at the FMA novitiate, the two SDB provincials who had known Mother Laura for twenty years wrote to the Rector Major, Fr. Pietro Ricaldone and also to the Mother General, Mother Linda Lucotti to highlight the sanctity of the deceased.

- Very reverend Father [...] we want to thank the superiors with all our heart for having sent to Poland a person of such great value and virtue, as Mother Laura. She came to Poland thirty years ago with only five Sisters and she left for Heaven leaving two hundred Sisters in nineteen houses and in each the spirit of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello flourishes in all its splendour. We are convinced that a saint has passed among us.

- Very reverend Mother [...] we want to express our admiration for the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians that possesses such members capable of working the wonders of the Lord like the late lamented Mother Laura. [...] Her exemplary and diligent life profoundly permeated the hearts of our Sisters forming them to the spirit of Don Bosco and Saint Maria Domenica. [...] The Sisters and all those who came in contact with Mother Laura, share the opinion that she died in the odour of sanctity.

It would be great to quote another letter here but it is too long. It was written in an Italian rich with the kind of errors that give it a pleasant freshness. It is from Sr. Helena Hermanowicz, one of the Polish Sisters who was proud of having learned the language of the founder during her novitiate in Casanova, Piedmont.

This letter can be read in the frequently cited book of Sr. Domenica Grassiano from pages 256 to 258.

Here, however, is a glimpse [since the emphasis is on grammatical errors, what follows has been left in the Italian language]:

L'anno 1932 la madre mi chiama e mi detto... Mi sono alzata e nemmmanco una parola... Non mi pentito mai quando fa

l'ubbidienza... Ha letto dei sogni di don Bosco o qualche altra cosa, ci l'ha spiegata che sono in dimenticati quelli giorni.



Many others, however, did not write letters, but they began to make pilgrimages to the tomb of Mother Laura, never doubting that she was a saint. It was beautiful to pray to her with great trust and simplicity recommending a myriad of intentions to her whether personal, for families or for whatever reason.

By the will of the people, her tomb was situated near the parish church and it was immediately and constantly adorned with flowers and candles. Children would go there on their way to school; adults before going to work.

Fr. Florian Grzesiak's testimony is very significant:

The tomb of Mother Laura is a place that attracts the faithful. These visits are very spontaneous. I have observed them for seventeen years. Lately the visits of the laity have increased. I can see this from my residence.²⁴⁰



The topic of the reputation for holiness is a difficult subject, large as life, indeed as the world.

In its various parts the *Positio super vita, virtutibus et fama sanctitatis servae Dei Laurae Meozzi* devotes almost a thousand pages to it, but certainly it does not exhaust the topic.

Who can weigh or measure the mystery of light and pain that the Holy Spirit weaves in the hearts of those who abandon themselves to God's call?

Mother Laura's reputation for holiness was already present while she was still alive. Sisters, priests, lay people, ordinary

²⁴⁰ Mother Laura's burial place remained at its original site until April 26, 1989. While the 75th session of the process for beatification and canonisation were taking place, her body was exhumed in the presence of the appropriate canonical commission and it was decided to assign her a more dignified tomb in the same cemetery next to the parish church.

people who came into contact with her, found it normal to use expressions such as:

- I became certain of her sanctity.
- At my first encounter with her, I had the impression that she was a saint.
- I want to highlight that from when I first knew her until her death, I was always fascinated by her goodness and sanctity.
- While she was still alive the people of Pogrzebień venerated her as a saint because she had obtained for many of them graces which they needed.²⁴¹

The provincial, Fr. Stanislaw Rokita stated:

There was a common conviction of the exceptional sanctity of Mother Laura, of her intimate union with God, of the efficacy of her prayers. Personally I was and am convinced of her spiritual greatness. I never had any doubts about this, rather, after her death, being very preoccupied with many difficulties in the administration of the province, I turned to her to ask for inspiration and help.

I was unreservedly convinced of her holiness. From people I met I always heard words of praise about her life and her way of dealing with people who approached her. Those who went to her would say afterwards, 'What a holy person! Already during her life she could have been declared a saint'.²⁴²



After *Mateczka*'s death the conviction of her holiness inspired confident prayer, which proved particularly effective.

Many testimonies have been collected from adults and children, Salesian Sisters, Salesian priests and lay people. Some come from persons who had contact with her or directly shared life with *Mateczka*, others from people who only came to know her after her departure for heaven. The graces received, are of different levels of importance. However, all share the same belief that they were dealing with a saint whose intercession was affectionate and powerful.

²⁴¹ *Informatio* 216 sgg.

²⁴² *Ibid.* 217.

All the testimonies cannot be recorded here and many people look forward to the moment when the Church, with its charismatic gifts, will pronounce the word, ‘miracle’, that word before which we can only bow our head and bend our knees in silent admiration of the powerful will of the Lord.

Notwithstanding, here are some of these testimonies.

One of them comes from Sr. Helena Kwiecień. The *Summarium* reports a long detailed testimony that she gave during the Process.²⁴³

In 1958 I was very ill since my gallbladder was almost about to burst. If I wanted to live I had to undergo surgery. But I could not decide and I left the hospital.

What happened next? Jaundice and a high fever set in; she was at the point of death. One day, which could have been her last, after a strong injection, Sr. Helena slept. She dreamed of Mother Laura who said to her, “Why are you not returning to your community in Dzierżoniów? Everyone is waiting for you there: Sisters, pupils, children”. Sr. Helena was the community animator.

The patient woke up and then went back to sleep. She dreamed that she found herself in front of Mother Laura’s room and that she said, as usual, “Come in”. She light-heartedly welcomed her and listened. Sr. Helena said to her:

- I cannot return to Dzierżoniów. I am ill and cannot travel.
- All right. Remain here for three days, rest and then go.

The next morning Sr. Helena woke up without fever and with a new sense of well-being. The doctor wanted her only to walk short distances and for brief periods of time. She kept her there for a few more days and then discharged her. She was cured.

I wish to add that from that moment on all disturbances linked to my gallbladder disappeared. A year later another doctor with whom I shared everything, could verify that all was now normal. Instead the doctors in the hospital of Dzierżoniów, where I had left the first time

²⁴³ Cf. *Summarium* 96 sgg.

not wanting to be operated, asked one of the Sisters, “Is that Sister still alive?”²⁴⁴

Another incident from the same year of 1958 is recounted by Sr. Maria Pytel. She was accompanying a very ill Sister, Sr. Aniela Księżopolska, to the hospital.²⁴⁵

This Sister was suffering from cancer. The metastasis had affected her spinal column. There was no hope of a medical intervention. However, Sr. Aniela did not give up; she put her trust in Mother Laura.

She began a novena of prayer, and here is the surprise. The doctors did not find anything anymore. Sr. Aniela was cured.

She died twenty years later but never relapsed into what had been her previous situation.

The last testimony comes from a special voice, that of Mr. Giovanni Meozzi, nephew of *Mateczka*. He enumerates several interventions of his aunt, although he never knew her in person.

- One day during the flooding of the Arno, and precisely on November 4, 1966, he saw on the bridge he was crossing the figure of a woman dressed in black with outstretched arms who said, “No, go back”. He felt that it was his aunt, Laura.

- One evening, he was called to the telephone on the vigil of the final exams of his musical studies at the conservatorium, *Luigi Cherubini*. A beautiful clear voice said, “Be at peace, prepare the following topics and also take the guitar”. The day after, while his mother prayed to Mother Laura, he was questioned on those topics and was then asked to play a piece of music on the guitar.

- Then it was his mother’s turn. She was very ill with pulmonary emphysema. They prayed to Mother Laura and she recovered so well that it left the doctor astonished. When her time came, she died with joy, serenity, clarity and trust in the will of the Lord Jesus. It was December 8, 1984. His mother died looking at an image of the Immaculate.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Ibid. 113.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. 138.

- Finally, his own child was involved in an accident at seven years of age. Consequently, he was prescribed medication that would be needed for the rest of his life. The mother confided again in Mother Laura. She told her that when she finished reading her biography, the child would no longer remain in that situation. So it happened. We do not know how to explain it, but when my wife finished reading the book, Alessandro was perfectly healed. He never had those troubles again.



During her lifetime were there manifestations in Mother Laura which might be considered extraordinary?

Yes, and some have already been recorded in this book.

However, her reputation for holiness is not based on these.

Mother Laura possessed special gifts of intuition in which she could read the inner recesses of persons and events. Sometimes people were forewarned that something was going to happen. This has been mentioned more than once in the course of this biography.

What is interesting at this point would be to highlight a phrase that is found in the documents for the process of her canonisation, “The charity of Mother Laura was open to all. People came to her to ask for prayers”.

Charity is an encounter with God. Is it surprising that predictions and graces are immediately derived from it? She prayed much with faith and love, and, “she had nothing to do” with what the results might be:

- After the birth of my daughter I became gravely ill. Mother Laura told my mother that she would pray and that everything would turn out well. After a little while I was perfectly healed.

- I went to Mother Laura to ask for prayers. She consoled me and assured me that I would have other children.

- Mother Laura met a man in the corridor at Pogrzebień. She did not know him but seeing that he was sad asked the cause. His wife wanted to go away, leaving him with two small children. She gave

him a friendly tap on the shoulder and said, 'I will pray for you; everything will fall into place'. This is what happened.²⁴⁶

The following is one final episode.

It was the early days at Różanystok and it was pitch dark. *Mateczka* woke up startled by strange noises. It seemed like someone was knocking from underground.

- Who are you? What do you want?

- I'm the owner of the house. Lift the planks of the floor, because the vestments are becoming mouldy.

In fact, under the floor there were some precious vestments. (Who knows? Perhaps jewelled according to the Orthodox style?)

They were hidden by the Orthodox clergyman before leaving Różanystok at the time of the Bolshevik invasion.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Testimonies of Elżbieta Kłosek, Lucyna Gorywoda, and Sr. Helena Zaremba.

²⁴⁷ Cf. *Summarium* 507.

SOURCES

In the preparation of this work the author used the following sources:

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Other sources are cited from time to time in footnotes.



Mother Laura was a woman steeped in the Gospel and had the fire of the charism in her heart. She knew how to create communities everywhere that were willing to follow Jesus on the demanding path of the Gospel beatitudes. She ensured a solid formation for all, and instilled the love of Don Bosco's Preventive System to be applied even in extreme situations of children deprived of their childhood, orphaned, alone, dispersed, and abandoned.

*Sr. Yvonne Reungoat fma
Superior General*