

***John Merlini and the Missionaries of the Precious Blood  
in the United States***

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**Introduzione**

Certainly one of the most important developments in Don Giovanni Merlini's long tenure as Moderator General was the expansion of the Congregation into the United States. The decision to send missionaries to America, and the first foundations there, began already in the time of his predecessor, Don Biago Valentini, when Fr. Francis de Sales Brunner and his little band of priests and seminarians were dispatched to America in 1843. But the crucial development came during the years of Merlini's general direction. It was during those years that the Mission in America had to come to terms with circumstances very different from those found in Europe, and had to adapt the vision and rule of the C.P.P.S. to them. The theme of the relationship of the Venerable Merlini and the United States, then, is important to understanding the achievement of the expansion of the Congregation into totally new circumstances.

I will develop my relazione according to the following scheme. In keeping with the subtitle of this convegno, "Tempi e personalità", I will first say a few words about the early contact of Ven. Merlini with Fr. Brunner, the pioneer and founder of the new Mission. Understanding something of their early contact helps us understand better their future relationship, upon which would be built decisions about the course of development of the American mission. The "personalità" therefore is not without importance.

Next I will try to describe briefly the situation Fr. Francis de Sales Brunner found when he arrived in the United States and which set the stage for his missionary endeavors. This situation of a frontier society was certainly different from what his European confreres could have imagined, and was perhaps even different from what Fr. Brunner himself might have expected. Understanding this situation is essential to grasping the challenges he faced, and the responses he made to them. Thus the “tempi” too need to be examined.

After setting up a picture of the situation, I will take a look at how Fr. Brunner and his missionaries responded to the needs and the situation of the place and times. Specifically, I want to address how Fr. Brunner interpreted the Rule of St. Gaspar in this very different situation. We also need to take into account what resources Fr. Brunner brought from his Benedictine background to help confront the challenges he found there. Those responses that were to shape the life of the Missionaries during their first decades in America were presented by Fr. Brunner to the Congressus in Rome during Easter Week, 1858. What was presented at that Congressus Fr. Brunner then codified into a “Rule of Life” (Lebensordnung) for the Priests and Brothers in the American Vicariate.<sup>1</sup> This Rule of Life was approved six weeks after the Congressus by the Procurato General, Beniamino Romani.

Formation of missionaries is always an important theme, since it has such a profound effect on the quality of evangelization. It also says something about attitudes toward the

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<sup>1</sup> (Lebensordnung für die Missionspriester der Versammlung vom Kostbaren Blute Unseres Herrn Jesu Christi in Amerika. Cincinnati, 1875).

spiritual patrimony of the Congregation and the attitudes toward the world the Missionaries face. We will also examine this aspect briefly as well, since Ven. Merlini addressed it directly in the case of the American mission. His interest in this topic culminated in a letter to the American seminarians in 1868.

I will also take a look at Venerable Merlini's attitude to further expansion of the Society in the United States beyond Fr. Brunner's original mission. And, lastly, I will try to draw a few conclusions from this panorama for our Congregation today.

It is important to keep in mind that the resource material available to develop this presentation is very sparse. Correspondence between Europe and America in the 1800's was difficult and slow and we find just a few letters and documents in the archives. Of importance for our study are the Acta of several Congressus held in Rome. I must necessarily draw heavily on those in my presentation as well as on those scholarly books that have been written on the history of the American Province.

### **Early Contacts between Merlini and Brunner**

Venerable Merlini came to know Fr. Francis de Sales Brunner, a Benedictine monk ordained in 1819 and then to become a Trappist, eleven years before he became Moderator General of the Congregation. In 1838 after becoming familiar with the Congregation in Cesena while enroute on a pilgrimage to Rome, he spoke with Don Biagio Valentini about entering our Society. After a ten-day retreat with the Jesuits

at Sant'Eusebio, he joined our community in April of 1838 in Albano to begin his period of formation with us. He obviously made quite an impression on Don Biagio and on Don Giovanni, due to his irreprehensible conduct, diligent study and prayer, and most exemplary observance of the Rule. Don Merlini wrote: "During his term of probation, Father Brunner proved to be of irreproachable behaviour. He was diligent in his studies and prayer, and he was a model in the observance of the Rule. He worked hard at translating our rules and observances into German, and he was soon fluent enough in Italian to hear confessions. He spoke Latin well and was also competent in the "theological" sciences."<sup>2</sup> Don Valentini wrote of him: that he "led a blameless life among us."<sup>3</sup> After a short probation period of only six weeks under Venerable Merlini, he was received into the Society in June of 1838, thus becoming the first non-Italian member of the Society. During his time in Albano, Fr. Brunner wrote: "With the approval of the Propaganda, of the Jesuits, and of the Holy Father, I have now entered the mission institute of the Precious Blood. Through the grace of God and through the special intercession of Mary, I believe that I have found the 'margarita pretiosa' which I sought for twenty years –a community of priests segregated from the world, and offering themselves in the spirit of Jesus for the salvation of souls..."<sup>4</sup>

Fr. Brunner then was sent back to Switzerland where he began to recruit priests for German-speaking lands and for other foreign missions. He was highly successful in

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<sup>2</sup> Life and Achievements of the Reverend Father Francis de Sales Brunner (C.P.P.S. Resources, 15) Carthagen, 1994, p. 23. The quote is unreferenced.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Paul J. Knapke, C.P.P.S. American Province C.P.P.S. Vol. I: Origins in Europe (Carthagen, 1958), p. 159).

his endeavors and began to receive invitations from Bishops in the United States to go there. On September 20, 1843 he received approval from the Moderator General Valentini to undertake this missionary endeavor to Ohio. He set sail with seven priests and seven students (or brothers as they were called before ordination) on October 20, 1843. They arrived in New Orleans on December 21, 1843 and then moved on to Cincinnati, landing on December 31, 1843, two months and two days after leaving Löwenberg. This fact was registered by Venerable Merlini in the chronicles of the house of Albano with evident satisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

I have spent a few moments to make this historical reference to the early contact between Merlini and Brunner because I think it sets the basis for the personal relationship between the two men. I think that it can be said that Venerable Merlini viewed Fr. Brunner with a basic trust, which would later be reflected in the relationship between the third Moderator General and the Superior of the American Mission.

### **The Situation of the Frontier Church in the United States**

In order to set the stage for any analysis of the relationship between Venerable Merlini and Fr. Brunner and so as to better understand the correspondence between the two and the events that were to follow, it is necessary to establish the context in which the new American Mission developed.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in a letter of John Stiefenhofer in Knapke, op. cit., p. 158.

## **Social and ecclesial situation**

The nineteenth century was a period of enormous development for the recently established United States of America. In 1803 President Thomas Jefferson had purchased an enormous tract of land from France, that more than quadrupled the size of the country. The increase in size made new settlement opportunities available. Relatively cheap land could be had by those willing to pay a small amount of money and clear their own property of forest and create rich farming ground. This opportunity for a new beginning attracted poor Europeans, especially Irish and Germans, to the United States between the 1820s and 1850s.

One of the most fertile areas was the state of Ohio, destination of Fr. Brunner and his little band of priests and brothers. During this thirty year period between 1820 and 1850 the population of Ohio more than tripled, from 600,000 to 2 million inhabitants.

Cincinnati had been erected as the diocesan see for the entire state in 1821. At that time Catholics constituted only one percent of the entire population. By the time John Purcell assumed the episcopacy of Cincinnati, the Church in Ohio still had only sixteen churches, fourteen priests, and 7,000 Catholics. But during the next fifteen years, the number of Catholics was to swell nearly tenfold, to approximately 65,000 souls, with just 57 clergy, and 74 parishes and 50 mission stations.<sup>6</sup> Most of those Catholic immigrants were of Irish and German descent. The Irish fit more easily into

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<sup>5</sup> Michele Colagiovanni, Giovanni Merlini, (1795-1873). (Roma, 1977), p. 230.

the general social, English-speaking scene. But the Germans, because of difference of language and custom, sought to have their own churches and schools, where their language, customs, and way of life could be preserved. It is no wonder, then, that the Irish-born Bishop Purcell so heartily welcomed the German-speaking band of Missionaries of the Precious Blood.

Catholics still only constituted ten percent of the burgeoning population. The United States' early history and foundation had been deeply Protestant in character, steeped in the ethos of England and the Enlightenment. The influx of Irish and many German-speaking Catholics was not welcomed by the majority of the populace. Catholics were seen to have a double allegiance --to their home countries and to the Pope of Rome. It was doubted whether they could ever become true Americans. Periodically riots broke out in cities like New York and Philadelphia against the Catholics, where men would be beaten and churches burned. The frontier areas like Ohio were not bereft of these same sentiments. For instance, when Fr. Brunner and his group set out from Cincinnati to reach their first mission in northern Ohio, they travelled as priests, i.e., they wore their cassocks and mission cross. This aroused the suspicion among non-Catholics along the way, it was reported, "who thought them to be advance agents of the pope sent out to scout the country in preparation for conquering it."<sup>7</sup> The prejudice against Catholics persisted much later. The story was told that, when Fr. Kunkler wished to purchase the property at Carthagena which would become the home of the Society's seminary, he sent the young Fr. Joseph Dwenger, disguised as a farmer, with a local businessman to make the

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<sup>6</sup> Knapke, op. cit., pp. 16, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Life and Achievements, op. cit., p. 50).

purchase from its Protestant owner. The owner, thinking Dwenger to be a fellow Protestant, was willing to sell it to him.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Territory without Ecclesiastical Structures**

It was to this pioneer world that Fr. Brunner and his fourteen companions arrived on December 31, 1843. He and his companions were true pioneers entering into a frontier situation where almost nothing was already in place. They had literally to build from the ground up. They had to face great hardships and always faced the difficulties of travelling large distances. In a letter to Don Valentini, Fr. Brunner mentioned that the mission houses were as much as twenty to one hundred kilometers apart.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of the Church which Fr. Brunner and his companions came to serve, it still needed to be developed. The diocese covered the whole state of Ohio, an area a third the size of Italy. Some church buildings had been erected, but for all practical purposes, there was no parish structure in place. Often settlers would build a parish church and house for the priest and a school, in hopes that clergy and religious might come. Consequently, the need for clergy was great. Religious orders, who had carried out special apostolates in Europe, found themselves pressed into service as parish priests in the United States. The first settlements for which Fr. Brunner and his company assumed responsibility, for example, had been begun by Redemptorists who, like the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, had not been associated with parochial ministry in Europe.

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<sup>8</sup> This story is recounted in Charles J. Robbins, C.P.P.S. The American/Cincinnati Province of the

The great needs of the parochial ministry was to have a significant effect on the development of religious life in the United States, especially among the institutes of men. The idea of a Franciscan or Dominican “church” in a city, alongside the established parochial church, was almost unheard of. Churches that were associated with religious institutes were almost always parish churches as well, with the usual school, convent, etc., attached to it. Shrines staffed by religious institutes developed only gradually --again because of the shortage of parish clergy. The only religious institutes who were to escape this “parochializing” of religious life were those who dedicated themselves heavily to teaching, such as the Jesuits or the Christian Brothers. Those who taught were exempted because from the beginning the American bishops set a high premium on establishing a network of parochial and other schools. This network --funded entirely from church funds, with no money coming to them from the state-- was intended to provide an educational bulwark against the Protestant influences in the public schools.

It was only after the Second Vatican Council that men’s religious institutes in America began the quest to rediscover the charisms that had impelled their Founders in Europe. This was the case with our Congregation as well.

## **Funding the Work of the Church**

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Society of the Precious Blood: A Chronological Account (Carthagen, 1985), p. 24).

Not only were no ecclesiastical structures in place, funding to support the work of the Church was lacking. There was a strict separation between Church and State in America, so no funds from the State were able to be collected to support ecclesiastical life. The newly established parishes had no endowment, and there was no benefice system to support the clergy. The clergy and the Church in general were dependent upon what could be collected from churchgoers.

The financial needs of Fr. Brunner's young foundation were therefore uppermost on his mind. How was he to support all his missionary endeavors? Bishop Purcell of Cincinnati was of little help; he was preoccupied with completing construction of his Cathedral Church. Brunner suggested that perhaps a collection or subscription could be taken at Rome, or perhaps through the help of Cardinal Franzoni some wealthy women in Italy might come to the aid of the new foundation.<sup>10</sup> He even thought of writing to France to solicit funding.

Faced with this enormous challenge, Father Brunner drew upon his Benedictine heritage to address the problem. With every foundation he purchased tracts of land that would be cleared of forest and developed into income-producing farms. To realize this labor-

intensive goal, large numbers of workers would be needed. The small number of brothers who cared for the needs of the priests would swell in ranks to care for the farms. The same would be the case for the sisters, who originally cared for the

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<sup>9</sup> Brunner, Letter to Father Biagio Valentini, January 19, 1844.

priests and engaged in Perpetual Adoration, but now also worked on the farms. Thus by 1855, only twelve years after Fr. Brunner's arrival in America, the Society numbered 28 priests, 64 brothers, and 224 sisters.<sup>11</sup> A Benedictine model was used to organize these formidable numbers, an issue that was to cause contention with the General Direction in Rome.

## **Formation**

A final challenge for the Church on the American frontier was the spiritual and academic formation of priests. Two problems in particular made the challenge daunting. First of all, the tremendous shortage of clergy for a rapidly growing population of immigrants made a great temptation to accelerate the training programs. Rather than take the four or more years needed for study and spiritual development, candidates would be rushed through to ordination in order to engage in a much needed sacramental ministry. There were throughout this period widespread complaints about the poor quality of the priests.

The second was the shortage of seminaries and suitable professors for preparing seminarians. America was a frontier society, and institutions of higher learning were largely lacking once one left the Eastern coast. Mt. St. Mary's of the West in Cincinnati, modeled on Mt. St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Maryland, had been begun by Bishop Purcell as the first seminary in the newly opened territories west of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Robbins, *op. cit.*, p. 15

Appalachian Mountains. Even then, the Tridentine reform of seminaries was only slightly known in America.<sup>12</sup>

Fr. Brunner found himself in the midst of this same challenge. Although all of his contemporaries attest to his considerable theological learning, they are equally unanimous in their estimation of the poor quality of preparation of his priests. This appeared to be the case already with those whom he had brought from Switzerland in 1843. He appeared to be keenly aware and even deeply concerned about this shortcoming, yet the accusations continued down to the time of his death. The issue of seminary training eventually became a point upon which Ven. Merlini intervened directly, an action that led to the establishment of the seminary at Carthagena in 1861.

### **Growing Tensions in the American Mission**

In the previous section we dwelt upon the distinct circumstances of the Church in the United States and the way that Fr. Brunner chose to respond to them. To be sure what Fr. Brunner and his band were to find in the frontier situations of Ohio could not be compared to the world in which St. Gaspar's community had first begun. There it was a matter of renewing an already established Church confronted with the challenges of indifference to religious practice and the corrosive acids of the Enlightenment. In America it was a matter of building up a Church structure to provide a minimum of sacramental practice, aimed at a Catholic population that was eager to receive whatever attention the Church could provide. The general

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<sup>12</sup> For a history of American Seminaries, see Joseph White, The American Catholic Seminary (Notre

American environment, as we have seen, was Protestant and frequently overtly anti-Catholic. St. Gaspar could reassemble already existent sources of Church income to finance his young Congregation. In America, Fr. Brunner had to devise completely new means of support. Here his Benedictine experience led him to develop large farms as a means of support.

Thus may have the differences between the young American foundation and the already established Congregation of the Missionaries in the Papal States have appeared. From Fr. Brunner's perspective what was being done was all a matter of necessary adaptation in a very different situation. But even in his own ranks there were other opinions. A number of the priests rankled under his rigorous approach to interpreting St. Gaspar's rule, some finding it even rigorist. The interpretation was looking more and more Benedictine, if not even Trappist in its perspective. Life in common appeared to be really monastic. Sharing goods in common became a strict regimen of a vow of poverty. Those wishing to join the Society in order to become priests found themselves being received as lay brothers who may or may not become priests, depending upon the whim of the Superior. And then there was the question of the sisters. Fr. Brunner's pious mother had founded a congregation of sisters devoted to the Precious Blood. In America this Congregation had grown from a few women who cared for the priests and seminarians and spent their time in perpetual adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament to a community that was more than three times the size of the men's community. They were now in charge of the houses and, at Fr. Brunner's behest, had control of all the material means of the Congregation, including the material goods of the priests. Fr. Brunner clearly saw

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Dame, 1985).

the priests, brothers, and sisters as a single congregation under the Archconfraternity of the Precious Blood, all serving the same purpose, and all answering to the same Superior – himself. Fr. Brunner described his understanding of the Congregation thus in a booklet intended to interpret the Congregation to a German-speaking public in 1855:

“The Missionary Society of the Precious Blood in America consists of three parts, of priests, brothers, and sisters. All were founded and established by the venerable servant of God, Gaspar del Bufalo. He is their leader and spiritual father. All three parts comprise but one spiritual family and all belong to the Archconfraternity of the Precious Blood...Although all the members comprise but one and the selfsame spiritual family, they are, nevertheless, separated from one another. Each division has its own particular task and its own peculiar rule of life.”<sup>13</sup>

Separate they may have been in the rule of life, but their finances were inextricably bound together and in the hands of the sisters.

Moreover, from the bishops and from some of Fr. Brunner’s own priests came complaints about the quality of preparation of the young men for their priestly duties. Not only were they poorly educated in theology, their general education was so poor that they presented themselves crudely and with bad manners.

The reputation of the Missionaries as being boorish or rustic and inadequate in theology had persisted from the very beginning. Bishop Purcell, who had ended up

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<sup>13</sup> Francis de Sales Brunner, Wer Sind Sie, die welche in die Klöster nach Amerika gewandert sind? In Four Historical Booklets C.P.P.S. (Carthage, 1957), p. 111.

accompanying Fr. Brunner and the first missionaries on the transatlantic crossing in 1843, had raised the question with Fr. Brunner during the voyage. These allegations of the poor training of Brunner's priests recurred again and again. Matters came to a head in 1854 when Bishop Rappe of Cleveland refused to ordain any more of the Missionaries until he could be assured that they were receiving a proper education for the priesthood. The seminarians, who heretofore had all been resident in the Cleveland diocese, were transferred into the territory of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati (the latter having been raised to this honor in 1850). He begged Archbishop Purcell for patience with the Missionaries.

A temporary solution was reached in 1856. Don Merlini, who had been apprised of these developments by Fr. Brunner, noted that already several years prior to this that Archbishop Purcell had written to Cardinal Franzoni about the poor preparation of the Missionaries. Don Merlini now suggested that two of the ablest of the seminarians be sent to the seminary in Cincinnati for two to three years to complete their education. They then would in turn teach the other seminarians so as to regain the confidence of the Archbishop and raise the level of reputation of the Missionaries in general. Fr. Brunner acquiesced to Don Merlini's request reluctantly, fearing that too much education on the part of the two young priests might lead to pride and a loss of the spirit of the Society. One of the two seminarians sent was Joseph Dwenger, who far from losing the spirit of the Society, became bishop of Fort Wayne, Indiana. He became one of the most prominent bishops in the United States. He developed a diocesan-wide parochial school system which was to be adopted by all the Bishops of the United States in 1884, and which remains one of the distinctive characteristics of the U.S. Church down to the present time.

Fr. Brunner had acquiesced to Don Merlini's suggestion, but continued to show hesitation. More and more it appeared that he used the acute need for priests as an excuse to limit the amount of education his own priests received, lest perhaps they might come to challenge his own authority. The matter of education of the seminarians and the increasingly overwhelming presence and role of the sisters in Brunner's Congregation led one of Brunner's priests, Fr. Anthony Meyer, to address a letter to Don Merlini in 1857, sent via Archbishop Purcell.<sup>14</sup>

Criticism coming from Fr. Meyer was especially stinging, since it was he who had been charged by Fr. Brunner for the last seventeen years with the preparation of the candidates of the Society for the priesthood. Fr. Meyer had clearly come to the end of his patience with Fr. Brunner's recurring promises to improve the situation for the priests. The continuing growth of the number and authority of the sisters only exacerbated Fr. Meyer's anxiety. To capture the tensions that existed in the American foundation, it is worth quoting parts of the letter at length. We are reminded once again that the letter is addressed to Don Merlini:

"Your sons and members of the Society of the Most Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in North America, humbly ask that Your Reverence kindly receive the following petitions.

We deem it an obligation in our holy religion to inform Your Reverence concerning our state and our affairs...The harvest is indeed very great and daily increases; but qualified laborers (as regards our Society) are very few. This results because of a neglect of basic education, because up to now it has been considered a matter of lesser importance. Neither are the professors required to devote themselves

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<sup>14</sup> Letter of Fr. Meyer to Don Merlini, July 14, 1857, cited in Knapke, *op. cit.*, 275-278.

to this study, nor are the necessary books obtained, nor has a house becoming to priests been erected...

Only one priest is present who has the duty of instructing the students, and he himself has lacked a proper course of studies...Nevertheless, this man alone has the obligation to teach the rudiments of grammar to beginners, to educate them in arts and letters, to make theologians of them -- and to do this within two or three or, at most, four years. Then, after the lapse of this time, the reverend bishops are wearied with ceaseless petitions to ordain our unlearned candidates, after having been given the added promise that they will be taught the necessary studies afterward...then they are left to their own devices, and the promise is never fulfilled.

The priests, students, and lay brothers live crowded together...in huts made of the logs of trees, contrary to decency or hygiene...only for the sisters is given...every care and concern. Disregarding the rules of our Blessed Founder, the Reverend Father de Sales has imposed on us his own statutes. In virtue of these we are bound to render an account to the sisters of the expenses of travel, stipends, and everything which accrues to us...In a single word, we completely depend upon the decision of the sisters. Whether this was the ultimate purpose of our Blessed Founder is not sufficiently clear to us. We are deeply concerned that the rule of our Blessed Founder, approved by the Holy See, be carefully and accurately observed. If however Father de Sales has received from Your Reverence special precepts for the American Province, then we will obey with the greatest observance once we have been made aware of the fact.

This must be noted: Our Society in America must necessarily seriously and rapidly decline because:

Under the regimen of the sisters our priests, usually ignorant of the rule of the Blessed Founder, observe no rule, but live according to their own whim.

Under this regimen neither the students and theological candidates are able to be properly instructed, nor do qualified priests join such a Society.”<sup>15</sup>

Father Meyer maintained that at least eight of the priests in the Society supported the charges that he was making, but admitted that others did not. Father Amadeus Dambach was persuaded to write a corroborative letter. In a subsequent letter to the Archbishop, Fr. Meyer maintained that three of the leading members of the Society in America, including Fr. Brunner’s delegate, claimed that the rule of the Founder did not at all apply in America, a rule which, he added, “they do not understand.”<sup>16</sup>

Father Brunner had embarked for Europe prior to this, and so was only apprised later of what was occurring. Needless to say, he was deeply affronted both by the contents of the letter and perhaps even more so by the circumvention of his authority. He felt certain that the Moderator General would refer the matter back to him, and that he would in turn delegate it to his vicar in America, Fr. Wittmer. His reaction in all directions was

angry, and indeed bitter. He decided that he would go to Rome while in Europe to plead his case with the Moderator General, Don Merlini.

### **A Meeting with Venerable Merlini**

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

On Good Friday, 1858, Fr. Brunner had an interview with the Moderator General, Don Merlini. The account of this meeting that survives is based on notes written afterward by Fr. Brunner. According to Fr. Brunner, Don Merlini understood that as long as there were parishes to be cared for, there would be limitations on the observance of community life. He agreed further with the arrangement whereby the sisters oversaw temporal matters, but was concerned that the proximity of the living quarters of the priests and brothers on the one hand, and the sisters on the other, would cause scandal. The priests and brothers should have, therefore, a separate house, Merlini concluded. But Fr. Brunner countered that while this may be praiseworthy, it was not practical. It was the sisters who had provided the capital for establishing the mission in America, and the American foundation continued to be dependent upon them. The growth of the sisters in America was a sign of God's blessing. To separate the sisters from the priests would put them in peril, for it was impossible to acquire an endowed convent in America as was the case in Europe.

Fr. Brunner's response to Fr. Meyer's letter, which had reached Rome, was angry and bitter. He questioned Fr. Meyer's and his supporters' motives, saying that the latter just wanted a softer life. He constantly compared Meyer to Martin Luther. Brunner again and again asserted that he only wanted to follow the rule of the Founder, but that circumstances in America called for other (and he hoped) temporary arrangements. He continued to insist that the place of the sisters was consistent with the intentions of the Founder. Here are a few of Brunner's own

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<sup>16</sup> Letter of Meyer to Archbishop Purcell, August 19, 1857; cited in Knapke, *op. cit.*, 257.

words on the matter, from a memorial he composed after the meeting with Don Merlini:

“As soon as the bishops in America relieve our priests of parochial care and permit them to establish themselves as here in Italy, I shall with joy as the least of the lay brothers live there and follow nothing but the common life.

...But because of the dearth of priests, and as long as no foundation or benefice can be established in America exclusively for the priests and brothers as exists here, I will adhere to present working arrangements already existent there, for I am firmly convinced that the whole affair is not the work of man, but of God...That the affairs of the priests and sisters, through an especial direction and providence of God, progressed in this manner and not in another and are so suitable to the conditions in America that no man could have devised them or outlined them, is clear as the noon-day sun. The work of God no one can change into something other than the work of God.”<sup>17</sup>

### **The Easter Week Congressus of 1858**

The scene was set for the Congressus to be held during Easter Week. The situation of the American foundation was to be on the agenda. Fr. Brunner and his travelling companion, Fr. Maximilian Homburger, had been received cordially, but there was clearly also an opposition group in the Congregation. Fr. Meyer’s letter had only fuelled their suspicion of the American foundation and its dubious adaptation of the rule of the Founder. Brunner admitted to Fr. Homburger that he was “much frightened” to appear before the Congressus. In preparation for the meeting, he retreated to pray and to scrutinize the rule article by article, making for himself notes

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<sup>17</sup> Francis de Sales Brunner, “Unsere Sachen,” (Beilage) April 3, 1858; cited in Knapke, op. cit., 290f.

as to how each article was observed, with explanations of why deviations were necessary.

These notes became the basis for his presentation. Contrary to his fears, the hostile attitude he had anticipated was not realized. He was instead commended for the emendations that he had made to suit the circumstances of a mission country. The Congressus was insistent, however, that a separate house for the priests, brothers, and students be established as a sort of motherhouse, completely apart from the sisters. The brothers would do the cooking and housework. The priests were, in general, to strive to live a common life according to the rule of the Founder as soon as was practically possible.

In the matter of the sisters' relation to the priests, they were to have no authority over the priests, nor were the priests to have authority over the sisters. The Superior (i.e., Fr. Brunner) was to direct the sisters through a sister superior and to have authority over both groups. In addition, Fr. Brunner as Superior was to have a Council of four priests to aid him in governance. Four names were suggested but not confirmed at the Congressus.

### **Brunner's Rule: Codifying the American Practice**

The minutes of the Congressus itself are brief.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the best record of what Brunner proposed to the Congressus and what had been accepted is the Rule that he composed from the notes of his presentation.<sup>19</sup> A few highlights from it would

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<sup>18</sup> Minutes of the Congressus, April 13, 1858.

<sup>19</sup> Lebensordnung, op. cit.

suffice here to illustrate how Brunner adapted the Rule of the Founder to the missionary circumstances of America.

The Rule, or Lebensordnung, is a commentary on the 1841 Rule, article by article. Although composed in those weeks subsequent to the Congressus, and approved by the Procurator General, Beniamino Romani, on June 7 of that same year, it remained in manuscript form. It appears to have been transmitted in America only in an “oral tradition” until it was finally printed in 1875.

The Introduction makes the intent of the Lebensordnung clear: “Far be it from us to wish to improve or change the Rule -- any, not even an iota. Rather we wish as soon as is possible to establish and erect mission houses in America like those in Italy, in accord with the will of our Reverend Founder, and to follow in every regard the example that he has left us.” But he immediately goes on to state that “There are, however, several things to be observed in light of the differences in circumstances, especially in regard to the common life -- something we have assumed to be an unalterable law since the beginning of our foundation -- in view of the circumstances or relations of the Missionaries to the Sisters’ Congregation, about which the Rule says nothing.” The latter seems to imply that Brunner felt that the presence of the Sisters was part of the Founder’s intention eventhough the Rule was completely silent about the fact.

Here I would like to note just three areas of Brunner’s Rule that are pertinent to our consideration of the changes made in America: (1) the observance of the spirit of the

Rule in light of the apostolate, (2) the structure of the houses, especially regarding the sisters, and (3) the formation of seminarians.

In his commentary on article 2 of the Founder's Rule, he notes that the "missions or holy expeditions and spiritual retreats that are enjoined upon us by our Institute, and as they are done in Italy, have not yet been able to be realized in America. The shortage of priests is great and the bishops desire that our Missionaries involve themselves during this shortage or in case of necessity with the care of souls – almost like what are in Italy pastors and curates." Later, under articles 29 and 30, he notes that "missions, as they are conducted by others, are also held when the bishops request them and when circumstances permit."

On article 33 of the Rule, which has reference to a special call to preach to heretics and heathens, Brunner felt that the American situation was most clearly apposite: "All that we missionaries are in America is contained in this 33<sup>rd</sup> article. We are among heretics and heathens, where there are no foundations in the real sense nor could there be hardly any, neither for the men nor for the priests of our Congregation. Until now we, few in number, are not enough to meet the needs of the bishop and must be prepared and ready day and night to go here and there, and very often have to change among mission stations."

These circumstances of the apostolate necessarily alter the structure of the mission houses. The need to provide sacramental care in outlying and often far-flung locations may give the wrong appearance: "Although they appear to have a fixed abode, like parish priests, they are and remain missionaries." (art. 3) Perhaps

because of the fact that the Missionaries had to live so much of their lives away from the mission houses, the discipline of those houses was even stricter than what would have been enjoined in Italy, especially regarding silence, and the rigorous, if not rigorist, interpretation of the horarium, choice of clothing, and other matters (cf. e.g., arts. 11-12).<sup>20</sup> On the neuralgic point of the relation of the sisters to the priests and brothers, Brunner is very explicit: “Just as no Missionary or laybrother can order a sister to do anything or direct her in some matter or interfere in her business, so do the sisters have no right over the Missionaries, and may not interfere in their affairs in any way. The Missionaries are in no way dependent upon the sisters, unless they choose to be so.” (art. 8) Yet on the delicate matter of income of the house and control over the income, he says: “Regarding temporal matters, our house in America can have no income, at least as long as the present conditions continue. Therefore our Missionaries must all the more apply themselves to poverty and thrift, that through the support of poor, orphaned virgins dedicated to God (i.e., the Sisters) and through the spread of the devotion of the Precious Blood they might save up for themselves a great treasure in heaven.” (art. 34)

Regarding the deficiency of training for the seminarians, Brunner again reiterates a set of ideals honored no doubt more in principle than in practice:

“In regard to studies our situation is still deficient, although in recent years we have sought to have our students be better instructed before the reception of Holy Orders than was the case in the early years. Every Missionary is ordered, insofar as his ministry permits, to devote one hour a day to theological studies, and those who are scrupulous

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<sup>20</sup> Brunner’s stay at Albano after the Congressus left him with a negative impression of the house discipline there – far laxer than what he remembered of twenty years earlier. He was particularly appalled by the seminarians, because of their “shrieking, howling and boisterous laughter during recreation.” Letter to John Wittmer, May 10, 1858.

and of good will devote nearly every day a great part of their time to their studies. But because of the care of souls it is impossible to determine a day every week in which theological conferences are held, in the meantime all are to come together every few months in one place for common conferences.” (art. 17)

However, Brunner appears not to budge too far from what had been his stance on education to date. He notes that “the method used thus far that seems to have been blessed by God shall continue to be followed.” This entails

“Each shall above all learn that which is deemed necessary, that is, that which a servant of Christ and the Church cannot be ignorant of without sinning; as well as those other things that appear to be useful for the place and time. They shall at least be able to understand the sacred Latin language, and if possible, be able to write it. They are to be instructed in church history, and what would seem to be necessary for them to know of rhetoric and philosophy, as far as circumstances permit. If they have at least the basics of these, then more of them can be explained and applied when they are studying moral theology and dogmatics. Beyond this each is to study the mother tongue (ie., German) so that they can write it correctly, and enough English to hear confessions in case of necessity and to teach catechism.” (art. 48)

“The Superior shall make every effort to assure that the students are well trained in moral theology so that they might know everything well and be able to decide cases on sound principles. The same should be so in dogmatic theology, as far as circumstances permit.” (art. 49)

## **Subsequent Developments**

Fr. Brunner seems to have taken the requests of the Congressus to heart. There was to be a motherhouse and a house of study completely apart from the sisters. The quality of the preparation of the seminarians needed drastic improvement. He was given the supreme authority over the American foundation that he had sought -- and indeed, had already exercised from the beginning. But he was never to have the opportunity to see these changes through. His health continued to deteriorate during his trip in Europe. He established a house in Schellenberg, in the Principality of Liechtenstein, where he died on December 29, 1859, almost twenty-two years to the day of the death of the Founder.

#### **The Kunkler Era (1860-1874)**

Fr. Brunner was succeeded by Father Andrew Kunkler as the Second Superior of the American Mission. Although he agreed very much with the vision of Fr. Brunner for the Society in the United States, he was of a much different temperament. Simple in word and manner, much sought after as a confessor, Kunkler was able to make the transition in America to meet the requirements of the Congressus.

He commissioned the young Father Dwenger, recently returned from the seminary in Cincinnati, to become rector of a new motherhouse and seminary, and to purchase land for this new house. In the aforementioned ruse, Dwenger went disguised as a local farmer in search of new property to secure the purchase of a farm near Carthage from an anti-Catholic Protestant landowner. The house built there was named St. Charles, after San Carlo Borromeo, the patron of the Tridentine seminary

reform. That house, while no longer a seminary, remains the spiritual motherhouse of the American provinces to this day.

Kunkler also took the first steps toward establishing the sisters as an independent congregation, by seeing to their education. For this purpose he opened a teachers' training school for the sisters at Maria Stein in 1862. The sisters were to become an independent congregation only in 1887, with Maria Stein as their motherhouse.

In 1868, Father Kunkler, accompanied by two other priests, attended a Congressus of the Society in Rome, at which the general directions taken for the foundation in America at the 1858 Congressus were reaffirmed. Father Brunner's Lebensordnung also received reconfirmation. The two areas that remained in dispute were the relation to the sisters and the continued commitment to serving parishes. The sisters still controlled temporalities in some houses, and that was still considered unacceptable. The practice did generally decline. The acceptance of responsibility for parishes remained a bone of contention into the twentieth century, when it became possible for the entire Society. The third area was the taking of vows. Kunkler wanted some kind of oath of fidelity as a way of stabilizing the membership rosters of the Community. The Congressus remained opposed to it.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the tensions that were present between the American Vicariate and the Roman General Direction, the Moderator General, in a manner congruent with his temperament, was able to rise to higher ground. This was evident in a remarkable and warm message he sent to the priests and seminarians at Carthagena on that

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<sup>21</sup> For a general account of the Congressus, see Robbins, op. cit., 29f.; Colagiovanni, op. cit., 377-79.

occasion (August 30, 1868). In it he notes “with great joy in the spirit we have received those things recounted to us about all of you by our most dear Vicar, first regarding your learning and discipline, and then your growth in devotion and work.” To the “most beloved Rector and professors, do what we know you are already doing, leading by word and example.” He urges the students to “respond with great diligence to the work to which God is calling you.” And reflecting perhaps on the rigorism of the late Father Brunner, Don Merlini admonishes

“It is not our custom to inflict on the body excessive penance, nor to engage in immoderate concern for health. And so your Directors are to see that there is sufficient relaxation and recreation from your studies. In your recreations we wish you to be joyful and cheerful in spirit, and this too is pleasing to God when done in obedience. In this manner your days shall be full.”

One cannot but detect a gentle note of irony here as one remembers the injunctions of Father Brunner.

### **Further Expansion of the Society**

Space does not permit here a detailed presentation of another important aspect of Don Merlini’s relationship to the C.P.P.S. in America, namely, the founding of the Province of California by Patrick Hennebery in 1870. Fr. Hennebery, the lone Irishman among the band of Germans surrounding Fr. Brunner in America, possessed an independence of spirit not dissimilar to that of the intrepid Benedictine/Trappist monk from Switzerland. His trek westward from Ohio to the western coast of America was opposed by Fr. Kunkler, but Don Merlini, in what

might be called a more perspicacious vision allowed Hennebery to undertake this new endeavor, on the grounds that Hennebery was expanding the Society, just as other religious orders were expanding at the time.<sup>22</sup> The Province was to fail seven years later, because of financial difficulties. Historically it is difficult to judge whether Don Merlini did the right thing in allowing Hennebery to found a province in California. He certainly did recognize in Hennebery some of the characteristics of a “founder” that he had seen in Brunner: deep devotion to St. Gaspar, a single-minded vision, and indefatigable energy. Hennebery embarked after the failure of the California Province on a seven-year preaching crusade that took him through New Zealand, Australia, India, South Africa, and the Holy Land. He paid off the entire debt of the Province in this fashion -- an amount that would run into the millions of dollars in today’s currency. Although his Province failed, his inspiration to the American Province gave rise to the Mission Band in the early twentieth century -- which was the first inculturation of Gaspar’s charism of preaching missions and retreats in America. Perhaps emblematic of his free-wheeling spirit, Fr. Hennebery, who died in 1897, is buried on Boot Hill in Virginia City, Nevada, known to later generations of television viewers as the site of the long-running cowboy series, “Bonanza.”

### **Giovanni Merlini: Tempi e Personalità – Its meaning for our times**

This relazione on Merlini and the C.P.P.S. in America has necessarily dwelt more on the American side of the story than on Merlini himself. As was noted at the outset, this was inevitable, given the infrequency of communication that was part of

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<sup>22</sup> For an account of Hennebery, see Robbins, *op. cit.*, 26, 29, 32-41; an unpublished manuscript on

nineteenth century life. What we read from this history is necessarily an indirect portrait of the third Moderator General. But what emerges is consistent with more direct portraits we have of him from contemporary Italian sources. Merlini emerges from the history of the C.P.P.S. in America as a keen judge of character who could see possibilities beyond what appeared as the obvious shortcomings of individuals. Francis de Sales Brunner was by every account a difficult person, but Merlini recognized in him also his intense dedication to St. Gaspar and the vision the Founder had for the Society. He was willing to allow a certain latitude in interpretation, and may have had a better implicit grasp of the difference of circumstances in the American mission than many of his Italian conferes. That would account for the unexpected positive reception Brunner received at the Congressus in 1858. That prior interview with Merlini must have been decisive for how Merlini set the tone for the Congressus. All contemporary accounts would suggest that it was not Fr. Brunner's innate charm that did so! Similarly, Don Merlini recognized in Hennebery a spirit that was best set free rather than restrained in some narrow sense of observance. The California Province may have failed, but Hennebery's inspiration as a preacher did more to bring much of Gaspar's original dream of missions and retreats to the American Province than any firm legislation could have done. It was not that Merlini was permissive; he clearly held his ground on many issues over long periods of time.

Certainly today, at a time when the Society has undertaken new foundations, Merlini's grasp of his own times has something to teach us of how we should approach our own. It is dangerous to impose on new foundations schemas of

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Hennebery was compiled by the late Edmund Binsfeld, C.P.P.S. (n. d. 605 pp.)

thought, even of how mission ought to be undertaken, unless those are closely examined to see if they truly fit the circumstances. Merlini had a keen sense of what the Church was later to call “inculturation,” and awareness of how the preaching of the Gospel must be sensitive to the cultural setting in which it occurs. In today’s terminology we can say that the efforts of Fr. Brunner to inculturate the Congregation in America were the results of his efforts to be “creatively faithful” to the charism of St. Gaspar in entirely new circumstances. Venerable Merlini seems to have been sensitive to this need and more or less tolerant of Brunner’s efforts in this sense. As we continue to branch out into new areas of mission, our Congregation today is called to this same “creative fidelity”. The Holy Father in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, invites Institutes of Consecrated Life “courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world...It is a call to develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms, if need be, to new situations and different needs, in complete openness to God’s inspiration and to the Church’s discernment.” (no. 37)

The Moderator General, as “the visible sign of unity in the Society”, whose “first duty is to vivify and renew the spirit of the Society, and to promote its expansion” (Nextos Normativos, C60) would encourage such creative fidelity, while at the same time keeping a watchful eye on the new experiences to assure fidelity to the basic elements of our charism.

A keenness of insight such as Merlini’s can only partly be learned. It grew out of a capacious spirit, and a genuine sanctity about which so many of his contemporaries

marvelled. May we be so fortunate as to be blessed with men like him in our own time!