

Gaspar del Bufalo as Spiritual Director: Letters to Mother Nazarena De Castris

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This article is a follow-up of one of the same title written by Jerry Stack and appearing in *Pacific Press* of March-April 1999, pp. 12-13. All the more, it is the fulfillment of an implicit promise made to Fr. Anton Loipfinger, our late Moderator General. He once remarked to me that no study of St. Gaspar would be complete without some treatment of him as spiritual director. It is of note that the only work on spirituality he published was *Il direttore diretto* (1825) aimed particularly for the missionaries. Evidently, he felt that spiritual direction should be one of the routine accomplishments of the men.

With that in mind, I read and reflected upon the longest extant spiritual correspondence we have, namely, with Mother Nazzarena De Castris, a Poor Clare in the monastery of Piperno (modern Priverno). It begins in May of 1825, just a week after Gaspar had preached a retreat for the nuns and concludes in late September of 1837, just three months before his death. There are ninety-two letters in all. Some of them are mainly details of business, e.g., commissions Gaspar asks her to carry out especially vis-à-vis the mission houses of Sonnino (reopened in 1833) and Frosinone. From 1825 to 1829, she was bursar of the convent and Gaspar did not hesitate to take advantage of her talent for business. One might note that Gaspar never had any hesitation in involving his friends in the Society's business. After all, if the Work was of God, anyone should be honored to take part in it.

From my reading and reflection, several salient facts emerge:

Direction by mail: One might be surprised at Gaspar's willingness to carry on spiritual direction by letter. Generally speaking, such a procedure is not advisable. But one should note Gaspar's willingness to do the best that could be done under the circumstances. His philosophy on this point might best be expressed in a remark he made in a letter to Cristaldi (Feb. 3, 1822): "In certain cases, if one were to seek to achieve the optimum, then one would not achieve even the good."

Gaspar's sources: There is no doubt about it. Gaspar's primary source was his own spiritual director from the time of his exile until his untimely death in 1819, namely Francesco Albertini. In a letter of January 29, 1828, Gaspar writes to Mother Nazzarena: "I assure you, however, that I am not fit to accept spiritual direction due to a lack of that full knowledge that is required, to be granted by God. That is what my holy Albertini used to say to me as he assured me that the Lord would call me to this, and he added that he would make an effort to instruct me. Now, he will have to do so from heaven."

Gaspar' style: Gaspar uses a strange term to describe his method of direction. He calls it "condescending." He writes, "I must declare that I, in matters such as the above, have always tried to use an approach of condescension; but your guidance is to be the one that you yourself receive directly from God's enlightenment." I believe that this use of "condescension" is a particular idiom of Gaspar. It does not mean stooping down from some lofty spiritual height to give aid to someone on a lesser level; rather, it means "accompaniment," going along the path with someone, meeting them where they are.

Gaspar's purpose: Through Albertini, Gaspar was thoroughly grounded in the spirituality of St. Francis De Sales. It animates all the correspondence with De Castris. Over and over, Gaspar tries to instill confidence in her somewhat timorous and, at times, scrupulous soul. Interestingly enough, he does not recommend De Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Rather, he recommends the *Treatise on the Love of God*. In a letter of May 21, 1828, he remarks: "I am very delighted to learn that you are reading the letters of St. Francis de Sales... I would also like you to read the treatise on the Love of God, little by little, and then note down for me the sentiments that make the greatest impression on your spirit."

Gaspar's method: Positively, Gaspar recommends a thoroughly Salesian regime: frequenting the sacraments (especially Holy Communion) and careful attention to the observance of her rule and her duties. Especially, he wants her to communicate her style of prayer and what progress she is making in it. He always respected the way God led each soul. This is evident in the letter of October 28, 1829, where Gaspar develops an elaborate metaphor comparing the way birds feed on the wing and Mother Nazzarena's eclectic style of prayer "here and there. II Gaspar encourages her to follow where God leads and not be troubled by it.

Negatively, he urges her to avoid excess, particularly in her eagerness to fast over and above the rule. Most of all, he wishes her not to mull over the past and to recognize her fears and scruples for what they are: imaginary. In a letter of October 9, 1830, Gaspar continues his supportive role in the face of her fears and apprehensions. "Now is there anyone who does not realize that when an enemy discovers the doorway firmly secured, he will then make all sorts of noises on the outside? If And that is precisely what she needs to realize: The soul agonizes, but that is because it loves God, the only object of its delight and peace.

As for everything else -- the rest is noise!

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