

Mercy: in the life and ministry of St. Gaspar

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In this presentation I will refer to Gaspar's youth and ministry as a young priest as well as his preaching and ministry as an apostolic missionary.

Gaspar's youth and early years of Ministry

When reading his biographies one discovers immediately that from early on Gaspar took seriously the Corporal Works of Mercy: Feed the hungry; Give drink to the thirsty; Shelter the homeless; Clothe the naked; Visit the sick; Visit the imprisoned; Bury the dead.

Gaspar showed a great concern for the poor and sick. As a young boy, he was moved by charity by the beggars, the marginated and the poor who thronged the Via San Stefano del Cacco under the windows of the Palazzo Altieri. The apartment of the del Bufalos was on the ground floor. The arms of Gaspar reached out continuously to give food to those unfortunate ones. At times he even deprived himself of breakfast and lunch—all to alleviate the hunger of those who gathered outside his window.

When he was twelve or thirteen years old he would go with his boyhood friend Pippo Berga to visit the sick in the hospitals. In those days the poor and the abandoned had no other alternative than to seek refuge in these establishments of public charity. In the midst of this labyrinth of suffering Gaspar wandered about speaking kind words and treating the sick in an affable manner.

When he was eighteen, Gaspar exhibited one of his greatest gifts: organizing for action on behalf of the 'people on the fringe'. Together with some of his classmates, Gaspar ministered to the marginalized: offering religious instruction to the peasants from rural areas who came to Rome to sell their hay; providing catechism for orphans and children of the poor; and setting up a night shelter for the homeless.

Gaspar was a youth who did not content himself with words, but also served the needs of society with action and with sacrifices. In this way he would find out what it meant to be a priest, what sort of priest people needed.

Special mention needs to be given to the **hospice of Santa Galla**. This was an ancient Roman hospice, which had fallen into decay. The zealous Gaspar had great organizational gifts. In 1806 scarcely twenty years old and not yet a subdeacon, Gaspar was called to direct the pious union of Santa Galla. Paolina del Bufalo, Gaspar's niece, notes that this pious work had two functions: on the one hand it consisted of a union of a few priests who exercised various activities especially placing emphasis on instructing and helping the poor and also providing the homeless with a place to live. Gaspar participated in both functions.

The work of Santa Galla would remain especially dear to the heart of Gaspar. He would anxiously cry over it during his exile and, even when he became the head of the new Congregation which he founded, he would still dedicate his apostolic efforts to it.

St. Vincent Pallotti in his Deposition for the Cause of Gaspar says: "The zeal and charity of the Servant of God was extended not only to those sick people in the hospitals, but also **to those living in the squalor of their own filthy places of habitation**, also those who, according to the practices, were not admitted to public hospitals because of the particular type of affliction they had or because in their local area of residence there was no hospital available for the care of poor sick people. So, the Servant of God realized with full fervor and zeal that there was a call to provide for the bodily needs of these afflicted people and even more the call to provide for the needs of their souls."

However, Santa Galla was not his only concern. Gaspar involved himself in his parish, the Basilica of San Marco in the Piazza Venezia where he was an altar server and was catechist for the children.

In 1800 Gaspar was admitted to the "**Sussidio ecclesiastico**", an organization of secular priests which had as its purpose helping poor clerics and, at the same time, involving them in the apostolate and in liturgical life. Gaspar was admitted on September 14, 1800. Here he cultivated his oratorical skills. He also took part in the young people's **Sodality of Santa Pudenziana** on the Esquiline Hill. Therein young people, clerics and lay, met periodically to pray together, to promote charitable activities, to meet and to discuss and to enjoy healthy entertainment.

In all, Gaspar participated in at least seventeen projects, confraternities, archonfraternities, pious unions or associations, "circles". Each of them was connected to a place of worship, to a saint, to a liturgical or charitable practice. They were composed not only of priests but of lay people, fathers of families, old people, people of every class.

Gaspar also taught catechism to the children and wayward boys of the streets. He personally searched them out and ran after them, calling each of them by name. He treated them with kindness and spoke to them of God and taught them about Jesus.

Though occupied in many activities, Gaspar showed zeal and thirst for souls as he also extended great compassion for those individuals locked up **in prisons**. Hence, he directed the priest-members of that clerical organization to provide spiritual training for these incarcerated persons. He also frequented the correctional institution for minors, next to the Church of Santa Balbina.

We are told that Gaspar always demonstrated a solicitude for the imprisoned, perhaps nurtured during his own prison experiences. He systematically visited prisons in the course of his missions and, not a few times, wrote letters in which he forcefully intervened to aid prisoners. He recommended more effective human and spiritual assistance and called for a milder treatment for all of them. He openly solicited a lessening of a sentence or an early release for a person who was desperate.

All this apostolic zeal is “accompanied by studies, inquiry, mediation, recollection and prayer - the sign of a rare, innate growing harmony between the inner life and external activity, between being and doing. He was what today we could call a “contemplative in action.”

The Preacher of the Piazza Montanara

Gaspar could often be found in the Campo Vaccino, amidst the broken arches and the half-buried columns of the ancient Roman Forum. There day workers from the fields would gather in search of work or to sell their wagon full of hay. Gaspar moved among these bizarre and rough figures inviting them to come together and he spoke to them of Christ. Among them he learned how to speak to the crowds and developed the gift which was natural in him: preaching in a way that reached the common folk.

As a young priest he founded the **Night Oratory** (1808), to get the men out of the bars and into a more positive atmosphere. He wished to offer the farmers and day workers an opportunity for religious activities, since during the day they were unable to attend. The little medieval Church dependent on San Nicola in Carcere, Santa Maria in Vincis, served as a place for this activity which was an apostolate especially loved by Gaspar and some of his companion priests.

Gaspar once preached the “Spiritual Exercises” (1813) to the “poor of the Baths” at the request of Abbot Canali. Those splendid baths of yesteryear sheltered those living on the very limits of basic sustenance. These despised and abandoned ones come to realize that these priests dressed in black loved them and were concerned with their salvation.

Ven. John Merlini tells us that Santa Galla and the Oratory were always present in Gaspar’s mind, even when in exile. He wrote to his friend Santelli from his exile in Bologna on January 14, 1811.... *“Look after Santa Galla and the oratory. Give it your best efforts so as to conserve everything in the best way possible.”*

During his exile, Gaspar's compassion deepened. Though he had been about works of mercy for most of his life, in the silence of his cell this work was clearly defined by the Precious Blood of Christ. In the solitude of exile, the vision became clear: to continue the works of mercy and the evangelization in the context of community. He would join forces with other men and women united in the bond of charity to touch others with the redeeming grace of the blood of Jesus.

In His Preaching

St. Gaspar brought devotion to the Blood of Christ out of the sanctuary and into the streets. His preaching was rooted in the saving act of Christ on the cross and so he carried the crucifix close to his heart and indeed, the mission cross became the symbol of the newly formed community.

He began his **Popular Missions** with the solemn procession in order to incite the people and to make them remember that the mission was a time of divine mercy and therefore one should celebrate it with joy.

In the middle of the mission, there would be the presentation of the image of the Blessed Mother, mother of mercy, in whose hands he commended the mission.

A special mention needs to be made with regard Gaspar’s preaching in the bandit infested Lazio region, south of Rome. In the early 1820s there was a severe problem in the Papal States. The bandits had control over many of the towns in the coastal provinces. It was a time of great lawlessness and many towns were out of the control of the civil authorities. One town in particular, **Sonnino**, was so bad that the government had given up completely and had become so desperate that they decided to destroy the whole town. The people were suppose to move out, although they were to be compensated for their loss of property, and the plan was to level the town. A number of

houses were demolished before the people's outcry forced the authorities to stop. Sonnino was just one of many problem places.

Cardinal Bellisario Cristaldi, a great admirer of St. Gaspar, and the papal treasurer and advisor to **Pope Pious VII**, had a plan for eliminating the scourge of banditry which he presented to the Pope. His plan was to fight the immorality and savagery of the bandits not with weapons, because that had been tried and failed, but with spiritual forces. He suggested that Gaspar and his new band of missionaries go into the towns and provinces where the bandits lived and establish mission houses. There they were to preach the Word, establish churches and chapels, and see to the continued instruction of the people.

And that is what the young missionary society did. Between 1821 and 1823 six new mission houses were opened. Each house was to have five missionaries and each team was to conduct 12 missions a year. In that way every town would hear the message of redemption and reconciliation during a two year cycle. From these houses St. Gaspar and his companions went out and preached the merits of the Precious Blood. They called the people to repentance and to return to faithfulness. They would preach on the street corners at night. They instructed the children. Armed with only the crucifix, they went into the hills to seek out the bandits to win them over. In two years the bandit problem was under control.

In a letter to the Holy Father, Gaspar begged him to “desist the abuse of beheading and cutting up the cadavers of those who were condemned to death by justice. The prisoner who has been anointed and died in reconciliation with God, should be given a decent, Christian burial.

Don Begiamino Conti, a leading expert on Gaspar, writes: “The Lord at all times had aroused in devotions certain acts that would erect a bulwark against the torrents of evil... But if, at other periods of time, we see the Church in its history, attacked in one or the other of its doctrines, nowadays the war we see is against Religion in its totality and against the crucified Lord. Hence it is necessary to reprove the glories of the cross and of our crucified Redeemer. The devil would rather have victims of justice but we would rather **open the fountains of mercy**. Nowadays, it is necessary to tell the people again **at what price their souls were redeemed**. It is necessary to make them know in what ways the Blood of Jesus cleanses souls and sanctifies them, principally through the Sacraments and to remind them that this same Blood is offered every morning on the altar in opposition to the many blasphemies and sacrileges committed. We must adore and bless it... “One comes to realize the intimate need for the devotion to the most Precious Blood with its message of mercy and salvation as an antidote to the “torrent of iniquity” which was upsetting the Church.”

At a time when many thought God to be far off and a severe judge, Gaspar preached **the love of Christ Crucified** who embraces even the most hardened sinner in His love. When he went into the mountain areas of Lazio to find the bandits, he refused an army escort, since he carried the only weapon necessary: the crucifix. Gaspar countered the image of a distant and judging God (Jansenism) with the figure of Christ, the King of love, wounded and crucified, dying and rising and infinitely merciful.

In a period when most preaching – especially most mission preaching – was focused on our sinfulness and our need for redemption, Gaspar’s preaching focused on what God has done in Jesus Christ. Like Jesus, Gaspar went, not with bad news for the sinner, but with the **Good News of the Gospel**. He did not go to condemn, but to proclaim God’s abundant love.

The central message of the gospel was one of love. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”* (John 3:16-17) That’s good news and it changes lives. It leads to conversion. It does not use guilt to change people’s behaviors. It does not paint a picture of a god who needs to be feared, but of One who has redeemed us in his own blood.

Reconciliation starts with God’s mercy. The scriptures make it eminently clear – mercy is a gift. It cannot be earned or deserved. In fact, St. Paul reminds us in the letter to the Romans, “God proves his love for us in that *while we were still sinners* Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) The Good News for sinners is that the reign of God is at hand, that we are already saved through the blood of the Lamb.

Gaspar in his Memorandum on the Devotion to the Divine Blood, delivered to Pope Leo XII noted: “It cannot be denied that the Lord, always rich in mercy, has provided powerful means in every age that are capable of drawing souls to a consideration of the Crucified Lord and thus seeing in them the application of the redemption through his Divine Blood.” (Epistolario, XII, Letter #1215, July 29, 1825)

And again: “Whereas the devil would like all to be victims of justice, we ministers of the sanctuary must make known the depths of God’s mercy. In this devotion, we have the treasures of wisdom and holiness; in it we find comfort, peace and salvation.” (Letter # 1214, July 29, 1825)

Gaspar and his Missionaries would establish groups of lay people wherever they preached a popular mission. These lay groups, called “Circles”, were composed of women and men, of young people, and of priests, who would meet in order to pray and to study and to do good works, thus keeping “alive” the fruits of the popular mission. This was something novel in the times in which Gaspar lived. Several of these Circles had as their mission both the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, so dear to Gaspar’s heart.

Back in Rome

Between missions and when in Rome Gaspar continued to be concerned with Santa Galla. Back in Rome his thoughts were directed to the abandoned ones; his first business had been in favor of the beggars. But his preference for the most poor did not stop him from doing something for the men of science, the humanists, the artists and including the socially privileged, the “aristocrats”. In the period of 1815-1816 he added **three new works** to his already prolific portfolio of apostolic works: he preached retreats for the university students, for the professors and students of the St. Luke Academy and also for the Noble Guards of the Pope.

Gaspar also reached out to the lawyers, to the “curia workers”. He met with them in the Chapel of St. Aloysius and preached the Exercises, adapting it to their juridical minds....And after having prepared them sufficiently by the canonical-legal dialectic, he gives free reign to his love of Christ the Redeemer, and speaks enthusiastically of that which he most desired: Jesus’ immolation for us. Thus to the teachers of earthy justice, he taught divine mercy.

He would always be assiduous in **the confessional**, both in Rome and equally on the missions. In that apostolate all his human compassion and mercy would shine forth. Hearing confessions also deepened his awareness of humanity’s grandeur as well as its weakness, its unhappiness and its cry for help.

Emidio Gentilucci, Honorary Papal Chamberlain and Beneficiary of the Most Holy Vatican Basilica, in his *Deposition for the Cause of St. Gaspar* tell us: “During the missions he recommended all, and especially the wealthy, to be generous towards the poor, and he took up collections for them. In one mission some ragged children were to make their First Communion, and he sent one of the missionaries round the neighborhood to collect clothes for them. He used also to visit prisoners in the jails, and the sick in the hospitals, and he frequently urged his companions to do the same.

During the last months of his life, a terrible outbreak of cholera claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in Europe. It also reached Rome. Even though Gaspar's health was quite poor by then, he insisted in returning to Rome to assist the victims of the epidemic. He died there in a small apartment in the Teatro Marcello, on December 28, 1837, assisted by his friend, D. Vincenzo Pallotti and his fellow Missionaries. The medical report noted the cause of death: **"He died a victim of charity."**

In Conclusion

No one sums it up better than **Vincente Pallotti** in his *Deposition for the Cause of Gaspar del Buffalo*: "The virtue of mercy, considered as a virtue annexed to Christian charity, was exercised by the Servant of God in such a full, continuous way as possible in the circumstances that he encountered, and even in a universal manner as can be asserted because of his corporal and spiritual works of mercy. This was a virtue which distinctly characterized the life of the Servant of God. His labors for the poor of Santa Galla while in Rome was never lost sight of. All the works that he promoted or had others promote through the efforts of his Missionaries, whom he constantly animated with zeal and persistence, were accomplished by them as well as by the organization that he instituted for the clergy wherever he conducted Missions. **These activities, I say, form an intricate pattern of zealous, charitable works that can be described as an accumulation of corporal and spiritual works of mercy...** He demonstrated that he was persuaded and deeply resolved to dedicate his life for the poor and said that the poor would carry him to heaven, if I am not mistaken, these were the words or similar ones that he used."

Gaspar was a true missionary whose feet carried him to wherever there was the need for mercy. The mercy he preached throughout his life was translated into action, in commitment with those who needed it.

We might describe his life in terms that Pope Francis uses today. He carried the Good News to the peripheries of society, both the geographical as well as the existential peripheries.

Gaspar himself expresses his sentiments in several of his letters. To d. Luigi Gonnelli he writes: "These latter (the poor), at least by desire, will form the object of my consolations until death. I beg you to encourage always in our zealous members the most generous concern for the aforementioned" (Letter # 75, 12 August 1813).

And in a letter to d. Gaetano Bonanni: "Please, I urge you not to abandon the poor, who are the image of Jesus Christ; so, if it were not possible to cultivate all of our dif-

ferent works, let not the most necessary be abandoned” (Letter # 9, 28 August 1810).

Gaspar often repeated the phrase in his preaching:

“Christus dilexit nos, et lavit nos a peccatis nostris in Sanguine suo” . (Ap. 1,5)

“He loved us and he redeemed us from our sins through His Blood.” (Revelations 1:5)

He saw in this text a program to follow.

For Reflection:

“Whereas the devil would like all to be the victims of justice, we ministers of the sanctuary must make known the depths of God's mercy so that justificati in Sanguine ipsius salvi simus ab ira per ipsum (Justified in blood, we will be saved from wrath through it). In this devotion, we have the treasures of wisdom and holiness; in it we find comfort, peace and salvation.” (Letter to Pope Leo XII, July 29, 1825)

Gaspar was a man with a heart that brimmed with love for the poor and sick. He saw Christ in those with needs. How does my life of discipleship respond to those in need? Who are the needy in my parish or community and what is my response to them?

We might ask ourselves: Where is the blood of the innocent lamb being shed today (the cry of the blood) and how might we respond with the resources offered us in the spirituality of the Blood of Christ (the call of the Blood)?

Salzburg
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Let us Pray!

Prayer to St. Gaspar

St. Gaspar,
you loved the persecuted Church,
and in the name of God you
accepted disgrace and exile.
We beg your intercession for the Church today;
help us discern how we are to live
and promote the message of the Gospel.
United with you,

may our hearts have compassion for the
poor and abandoned.
Increase our love for the Blood of Christ,
so that we also may be
prepared to risk our lives.
We thank God for your
good works and example.
Strengthen our union with you
that we may not weaken,
but grow stronger in our vocation to the
honor of God and the
salvation of souls.
Amen.

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