

# **Saint Hannibal Di Francia**

(1851 - 1927)

## **A Testimonial From His Sons and Daughters on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of His Holy Passing 1927 - June 1 - 1977**

### **The Apostle...**

Saint Hannibal Di Francia was an apostle of prayer for priestly vocations, an apostle of charity - particularly for neglected orphans - and an apostle of devotion to St. Anthony of Padua.

### **The Road to the Priesthood**

Saint Hannibal was born in Messina, Sicily on July 5, 1851. His father was Sir Francis Di Francia, Marquis of /Saint Catherine, named by Pius IX as Papal Vice-Counsel and Honorary Lieutenant Commander of the Navy; his mother was the noblewoman Anna Toscano. When Saint Hannibal was two years old, his father died. At the age of seven, his mother sent him to St. Nicholas Boarding School in care of the Cistercian Fathers. There, he applied himself to the rudiments of knowledge, and his heart caught fire with religious fervor. He would always cherish the memory of good Fr. Foti, who enkindled in him the flames of love for the Blessed Virgin.

His love for others began to give off sparks. A poor man had gained entrance to the school cafeteria. While he was off in one corner, eating the little that had been given him, someone gave a signal for the fun to begin. Not only several of the school children but those who were supervising in the cafeteria went from witticisms to wisecracks, then started tossing at him fruit peels, cores, and table scraps. Humiliated, the man got up to leave. Little Hannibal couldn't bear to see the sight. He went to get a basket and put in it some bread, cheese, and fruit. He ran up to the man and gave him the food. The old man embraced him and, with tears in his eyes, kissed the boy. The Revolution of 1866 forced the boarding school to close down. Saint Hannibal was fifteen years old. Under the tutelage of the famous Sicilian poet Felice Bisazza, he continued his studies and made good progress. He was a born poet and if he had the time and means to cultivate his natural bent, he would have surely reaped laurels in the field of poetry. After all, isn't charity a form of poetry, the highest form of poetry?

An uncle of his was the editor of La Parola Catolica (The Catholic Word), and Saint Hannibal would contribute articles in those early years of his apostolate of the press. But he didn't confine his energies to the power of the pen. One day when he was leaving the Cathedral, wearing his good suit and jaunty hat, he noticed a soap-box orator in the square holding forth to a small circle of listeners and vociferating against the Pope. Without giving it a second thought, the pint-sized nobleman broke into the circle, confronted the smart-talker and cuffed him one in grandiose fashion, which muzzled the man and won the applause of the bystanders.

Rather suddenly and by a supernatural impetus, he felt himself drawn to the Sanctuary. On March 16, 1878 he was ordained a priest of God.

### **His Mission**

A certain man named Lawrence, who was a florist, came to the city one day. Under his arm he bore a basket full of gardenias, the sweet-smelling white gardenias of Cumia. All of a sudden, the basket slipped from him, and the snow-white flowers landed in a puddle.

"It's God's will!" said the poor man, resigned to having lost a day's pay.

"Very good, my friend. God's will be done always!" interjected Fr. Di Francia. He was only a few steps behind the florist when he saw what happened and heard the words. He continued: "Look; it's nothing, really. Stay where you are hold the basket."

The priest bent down, picked the flowers up from the mud, and put them back in the basket. They were white. Snow-white, like before...

"Why, it's a miracle!" said the flabbergasted florist. Saint Hannibal Di Francia only quickened his pace and went on his way.

God earmarked Saint Hannibal Di Francia for this mission to lift up the souls of orphans from the mud and make their beauty shine in the light of truth and grace.

## **A Providential Meeting**

He was still a deacon when he had an experience that seemed to have God's fingerprint on it. It spelled out his future work.

One day he came upon a blind youth, a certain Francis Zancone, who asked him for a handout.

"Where do you live?" said the priest.

"Out by the Zaera."

"What do you know about God?"

"What can I say?" said the man. "I never learned about Him."

"Let me pay you a visit. Here!" He put some money in the boy's hand.

When the mardi gras of 1878 rolled around, Saint Hannibal Di Francia went to seek out Avignone Flats. It was a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city, a veritable rats' nest, with about a hundred tenants living in wretched promiscuity amid misery and filth. Here a multi-headed dragon of confusion, ignorance, material and moral disorder of the worst kind raised its ugly head. The place was rightly defined as an "abominable strip of land inhabited by a pack of animals." Wrote Saint Hannibal Di Francia: "It was really a place where there was work to do for Jesus Christ."

## **The Labor at First**

Immediately he set himself to the hard work of evangelization. The ghetto "senior citizens" looked upon the lean and emaciated figure of the young priest - the apparent do-gooder. They felt they had to tell him and openly advised him to back off:

"To convert this slum crowd, you need two Capuchins with whiskers of steel!" And they motioned him off with the words: "It's not the kind of work for you to be doing. Leave while the going's good."

But he didn't go, and his work began to pay off little by little. By dint of countless sacrifices, the Avignone neighborhood took on a new face. It was redeemed morally and materially, and the "Father" - the name they began to call him from that time - made that notorious place the center of his works of charity, which would spread out from there all over Italy and abroad, chiefly for the sake of neglected orphans.

At the outset of his apostolate, one day he came upon a retarded youngster. Filthy, slovenly dressed, he was the laughing stock of the local wiseacres, who would sadistically make fun of him. Saint Hannibal led him away from the hurly-burly atmosphere, brought him home, gave him a good washing, and placed him on his bed to get some rest. Recalling that poor people are Christ in disguise, he bent down to kiss the boy. Suddenly, he seemed to have a vision. It was for a fleeting moment. He looked upon and kissed Jesus Christ.

In those tender verses he wrote in honor of the Holy Face of Our Lord, perhaps he was harking back to the lovely vision he had once had. It had disappeared quickly but it left in his soul a perennial glow of living faith and burning charity toward the poor - the pride and joy of his life. To him, they were really the great people, the beautiful people of the Kingdom of God; and when he called them "barons," "marquis," and "princes," as he used to do, he didn't do it, as the world might think, out of jest or mockery. He was merely manifesting his conviction about them. To clean the poor, to kneel down before them, to wash their feet, to kiss them with great affection - this was one of the greatest and purest joys of his spirit, and he wouldn't trade it for the world.

### **Trouble, Trouble...**

The work destined for him by Divine Providence soon became clear. Without overlooking the grownups, to whom he gave material bread as well as moral and religious instruction, Saint Hannibal was concerned mainly with youngsters. He began an evening school for boys, a day kindergarten for girls from five to eight years old. Then, the girl's orphanage got under way and, on November 4, 1883, the boys' orphanage.

Troubles cropped up quickly. First came the formidable opposition of parents and friends. He was misunderstood even by the clergy. Why should he get involved with the outcasts of humanity, when he could and ought to be a speaker, an apologist, and a teacher? But, with the blessing of his Archbishop and the encouragement of outstanding servants of God - Fr. Cusmano, Fr. Louis DaCasoria, Don Bosco- he remained steadfast on the way God had marked out for him. And the way became a springboard to long lasting labor and worry; the struggle for the very existence of his institutions beleaguered by a thousand contradictions but always triumphant, thanks to God's mercy and the unbounded faith of His servant. During the day, he received bitter refusals and reproaches. He reminisced about those days in his poem:

*So bread upon the table might not lack,  
I brave the cold, the dripping sweat on back...  
Oh, here it is today the food my children need;  
Tomorrow's dole our Father sure will speed.  
I've often knocked on doors, a scant welcome bidden  
My sentence stiff has scarce been hidden:  
"Beware of him, the pest, he's lost his mind.  
Now let him suffer fate unkind!"  
Discern my martyrdom, my flaming core;  
No father loved his children more...  
For you I God and man implore!*

### **The Rogationist Apostolate**

At the same time, he was beset by the cares of another apostolate. Since the time of his youth, Saint Hannibal felt himself singularly drawn to prayer in order to obtain priests for the Church. Particularly in his lengthy adorations before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, he would sorely lament the need for "other Christs." When he read in the Gospel the words of Jesus: "*Rogate ergo Dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam* (Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest)," Matt. 9, 38; Luke 10, 2, a supernatural light illuminated his mind. He understood that the Lord was calling him to devote his life and every energy to propagating the divine command and beseeching others to obey this categorical order from the Divine Master. He would say over and over: "People pray for the rain, for good crops, for freedom from divine punishment, and they forget about praying to God so He'll send good evangelical workers into the mystical harvest." He accordingly wrote and promulgated a series of glowing prayers which are compiled in a booklet form and translated into different languages. "The salvation of the world," he said, "depends on priests, and the means we have to obtain them is found surely and infallibly in the prayer commanded by Our Lord Jesus Christ; not to obey the command of Jesus means not to desire priests, not to desire the salvation of the world." In an ardent invocation to the Sacred Heart, he fervently entreated: "How come all those who love You don't address to this

wholesome prayer? How come, when so many souls are perishing...the Catholic world doesn't rise up in one body to implore from Your Divine Heart...numerous priests? Spread, O Lord, from the north to south and from east to west, this spirit of prayer. May the hearts of all Your cardinals, Your bishops, Your priests, and the entire Church burn and spill over with this spirit... May the hearts of all the virgins and nuns consecrated to You be inflamed with this spirit ... We ask You, Lord Jesus, that the evangelical prayer of Your Heart will triumph throughout the Church and throughout the world. Let it become a universal prayer ... May the eyes of all be penetrated by that ceaseless sound from Your longing Heart: "The harvest indeed is abundant, but the laborers are few. Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest ..."

This was the guiding light of his life: his program, his uniform, his banner. "In season and out of season," we could say with the Apostle, with all people and at all times he spoke about and dwelt on the *Rogate*. He made use of every chance he had, every circumstance that lent itself. His burning desire was to draw the attention of the entire Christian world to the need for this prayer. Reflecting that this apostolic dream of his could one day come true, he wrote to a bishop, saying: "I could die for joy." The same works of charity to which he geared his energies and those of the religious congregations he founded were considered by him only in terms of obedience to the Rogate of Jesus: "If we pray for good workers, we must be and work like zealous workers ourselves, and this spirit of prayer can be given a foothold and spread to others by propagating it among children, who will embody it tomorrow in their families and in their society."

The chief scope of his congregations is obedience to this divine command and propagation of this prayer. His Religious are bound by a *fourth* vow in this regard, and in all his houses the invocation resounds perennially and fervently on the lips of all his children: "Lord of the harvest, send forth laborers into Your harvest!" To spread this spirit of prayer among the clergy, he founded the "Holy Alliance," whereby bishops, prelates and priests are invited to engage in an intense crusade, in spiritual union with his institutes. And for the Faithful, he canonically established the "Pious Union of Evangelical Prayer." He obtained from Pope Pius X the privilege for his institutes of adding to the Litany of the Saints after the verse: "Ut Domnum Apostolicum, etc." this other verse: "Ut dignos ac sanctos operarios in messem tuam copiose mittere dingeris, Te rogamus audi nos (That You would deign to send worthy and holy laborers into Your harvest copiously, we beseech You to hear us)," and he managed to have over eighty bishops from all the continents sign a petition, which he forwarded to the Holy See, so that this verse might be extended to the universal Church.

In his correspondence with pious souls in monasteries - and he had many of them - the theme of the *Rogate* recurs again and again, like a musical obligato.

When Divine Providence gave him the means to have erected in Messina that jewel of a temple which is the Shrine of St. Anthony, he wanted inscribed in very large letters of the façade of the building the divine command: "*Rogate ergo dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam.*"

### **Rogationist Fathers of the Heart of Jesus**

Let us return to Avignone Flats and the first charitable works that flowered there. One care was ever on Father Hannibal's mind: the grassroots establishments - to whom could he entrust them?

For many years he had to carry on alone the work for his boys' orphanage. He did have the help of some good priests, some clerics, and an occasional layman. But their help was sporadic and soon fell off altogether, for the life of Saint Hannibal Di Francia was a life of sacrifice and immolation, amid the most rigorous poverty, that bordered on misery, fed only by the living flame of his faith and of his ardent charity. He finally succeeded in getting together a hefty group of clerics, about thirty of them, whom he thought he could rely. But worse came to worse and, in the space of a few months, every single one of them had gone. The priest was all alone once again.

"Well, it looks like they're all gone!" he said one night to Fr. Vitale, pointing to the empty places in the dining hall. But he didn't complain about any of them. He adored in all things the loving will of God.

He set himself to work again with admirable tenacity and with an even more admirable trust in Divine Providence. With the help of those who were his most reliable collaborators - Fr. Pantaleone Palma and Fr. Francis Vitale - he was able to lay the groundwork of his male congregation, which he named after the *Rogate*: The Rogationist Fathers of the Heart of Jesus.

### **The Daughters of Divine Zeal**

In the beginning, Saint Hannibal entrusted the girls' orphanage to a distinguished widow who had been converted to a life of piety through one of his sermons: Laura Jensen Bucca was a genuine help to him for several years, but then she resigned. The priest turned to various religious communities, only in vain. So he decided to found his own congregation of nuns whom he called Daughters of Divine Zeal, patterned after the inspiration of the *Rogate* - the expression of the zeal burning in the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the glory of the Father and the salvation of souls.

The budding community was not without its headaches: tribulation goes hand in hand with all the works of God. Not only that, it is the bright badge of divine favor. In the light of a schism which occurred, the Institute was suppressed by Church authority. Thanks to the offices of a venerable Friar Minor, Fr. Bernard of Portosalvo, a one-year stay on the decree was given to the Fr. Hannibal. The Institute was put on trial. During that year, he had as a cooperator for his work none other than Melanie Calvat, the famous young shepherdess to whom the Mother of God appeared on the mountain of La-Salette. Melanie remained at the Institute for one year, from September 1897 to September 1898 - a year which, in the words of Saint Hannibal, was a year of blessing. The trial period was weathered successfully, having a healthy and vigorous effect on the community, and the women's congregation was put on a safe footing.

### **The Earthquake of 1908**

Soon, the sisters' community in the Avignone district had to pull up stakes. The original site had become too confining for the work that now burgeoned. First, they moved "Brunaccini," the historic palace where Goethe once stayed; then, in 1895, they settled permanently in the Monastery of the Holy Spirit, which was under perpetual lease from the Township.

Then came the earthquake of 1908. It caused great damage to the two houses in Messina. No need to dwell on the terrifying scenes occurring on that dawn of blood ... But God's protection was brilliantly made manifest. There were no victims at the male institute: when the dormitory collapsed, all that was left was that section of the roof above the orphans who had gathered in one corner, around the statue of Our Lady, for their morning prayers. The same phenomenon occurred in the chapel, where the Religious were making their meditation: the roof fell in, except for one portion right above where the Religious were praying.

In the sister's house, the orphan girls were all saved, not without the evident protection of God. Amid the tremendous shaking of the walls that ere toppling and the frightening pitch darkness, the girls found their way out to safety, clinging to one another in the garden. One thirteen-year-old girl was thrown to the street by the impact of a tumbling wall. She landed against a balcony and escaped being dashed to pieces. A five-year-old girl didn't know what was happening: some attic beams had fallen across her bed, protecting it from the ruins. When she awakened, she got out from under the entanglement and stood there amid the ruins, waiting for someone to come and get her. The little girl apologized to the sister for not having heard the alarm clock go off (!).

But there were victims, and the Lord chose them from among the sisters. It seemed that St. Anthony wanted thirteen of them: his symbolic number - thirteen candles that went out, to obtain from the Divine Mercy the

safety of the Institutes. In their honor, Saint Hannibal had thirteen sliver-stick candles lit in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit, each one bearing the name of a dead sister.

The earthquake was a mighty blow to the heart of Saint Hannibal. He was in Rome at the time. It was ten o'clock in the morning of Tuesday, December 29 when he read about it in the newspapers. He was dumbfounded. Then he raised his eyes to heaven: "My God! My Messina! ... My children! ..."

Fortunately, he was able to secure passage on the steamboat *Scilla* and left at once.

"My heart was heavy with grief," he wrote, "I resigned myself to God's will, the just wrath of God, and I tearfully prayed for the survivors and for those who died, among whom I could picture all my children in Christ!"

A state of emergency had been declared in the city of Messina. No one could enter it from the harbor. Saint Hannibal had to sail to Catania and from there he went to Messina. He was able to rejoin his children on the evening of January 5, just at the end of a triduum of prayer made by the community to obtain his safe return.

### **His Institutes on the Rise**

The earthquake was a trial sent by God. The institutes gained from it, because they began to expand from that time on. The first branch-houses had already been opened in 1902: the orphanages at Taromina and the day-hop special school for girls in Giardini.

After the earthquake, houses were opened in Francaville Fontana and Oria (Brindisi); then, St. Pier Niceto (Messina), Trani (Bari) for the orphans of the 1910 cholera, Altamura (Bari) for the orphans of the First World War, and St. Eufemia D'Aspromonte (Reggio Calabria), Novara (Messina), and Rome.

### **St. Anthony's Bread**

Mention was made that one of the greatest tribulations confronted in his work for more than twenty years stemmed from straitened circumstances. Saint Hannibal overcame them by trusting blindly in Divine Providence.

His modest family inheritance came to nothing in a short time; and needs were multiplying day by day, all the more so since his charity was not confined just to the homeless people he had taken in. Needy people came to him from all over and they never went away unsatisfied. He gave without stint and without counting the cost. He gave always. He gave to everyone. And the less he seemed to have, the more generous he was in giving, convinced as he was that this was the secret for winning God's favor. In Messina they used to say:

"This is the house of Fr. Di Francia. Have a seat and you'll get something to eat."

To his children he wrote: "let the Rogationists remember that our Pious Society was born with this holy mission to give; and the more we give, the more the Lord will give to us, since He said: 'Give, and it shall be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, shall they pour into your lap.' And in another place: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" So when Divine Providence put His servant to the test to exercise his faith and increase his merits, He always came across with help in due time, in the inscrutable ways He is famous for. When all seemed lost, at the last moment a quirk of circumstance changed the picture. It happened more than once that there was nothing on the table for dinner for supper. Saint Hannibal would then gather his children around him, lead them in prayer or, more often, bring them before the Tabernacle. Providence came across infallibly.

Here is an episode that savors of the supernatural. On one of those not infrequent days when the cupboard was bare, the orphans had gone to the dining hall to find there was nothing on the table. Saint Hannibal came in. "Children, let's say a prayer, and the Lord will see that we get what we Need." The prayer was hardly over when someone arrived at the door with a shopping bag full of bread and a large fish, enough indeed for a meal. The fish had been caught that morning by some people who happened to go fishing in the waters of Milazzo, and the unknown benefactors thought it would be a good idea to give it to the orphans.

But the final solution to the economic problem in the houses of Saint Hannibal was freely given by St. Anthony of Padua.

The reblossoming of devotion to St. Anthony's bread is usually attributed to Teresa Bouffier Di Tolone and traces back to 1890. Actually, it had its beginning three years before that in Messina in 1887. The widow Susanna Consiglio Miceli, during the time the cholera was raging, promised that if St. Anthony spared her from the dread disease together with her loved ones, she would give 10 lire to the orphans of Saint Hannibal to buy bread in honor of St. Anthony. The favor was obtained, and the lady kept her promise, which she frequently renewed whenever there was need of some favor. The Miracle Worker would lavishly give it through the prayers of his orphans. Saint Hannibal therefore placed his orphans under the protection of St. Anthony. He wanted them called "Anthonian Orphans" and his charitable institutes "Anthonian Orphanages."

On one of the walls of the small oratory was an oil painting of the Saint. Candles were lit in front of it, and the orphans would pray there. Thus began the cult of St. Anthony, which developed so greatly that it culminated in the majestic temple of the Evangelical Rogation, intended as a Shrine to the Saint.

Propaganda got under way in the churches throughout the various dioceses of Sicily, with the boxes of "Saint Anthony's Bread for the Orphans of Fr. Di Francia," through a pamphlet which described the purpose of the Institute and the nature of the devotion, which focused on the renewing of morals and the reflowering of Christian life and not just on getting material favors from the Saint.

In the wake of that came "The Miraculous Secret," a booklet whose editions increased by leaps and bounds each year. The monthly periodical entitled "God and Neighbor" was first published in 1908. Having a modest format and a circulation that rose to more than half a million, it spread throughout the five continents. "God and Neighbor," the organ of all the Anthonian orphanages lasted until 1942. After the war, each orphanage put out its own edition of "St. Anthony Messenger."

### **The Life of the Institutes**

The Program of Saint Hannibal was prayer and work. His primary concern was to preserve the innocence of children. Therefore, he took them in when they were small, from five to seven years of age, and cared for them with a more than maternal solicitude. He followed their progress in study and work with anxiety and trepidation. Above all, he looked after their virtue, which he wanted to be sound, firmly anchored to the fear of God, impervious to the allurements of passion. Therefore, in his institutes the first and quintessential means of formation was piety, with prayer as a need of the soul and the frequenting of the Sacraments as channels of grace and wellsprings of supernatural life. The focal point of piety was Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, Who was to be received as frequently as possibly and with the holiest dispositions. His divine Eucharistic Presence was the center of attention in the house. Before making his first sacramental oratory, for a good two years he instilled in his boys a desire for the Divine Presence of Jesus with fervent prayers and tender verses that resounded nostalgically in the dwellings of Avignone:

*Heaven of heavens, open wide;  
Descend on us our hearts' delight,  
Hidden from us His glory and might.  
Within the Host a victim*

*Of His saving love,  
The Redeemer comes as a gentle dove!*

From July 1, 1886, the day of Jesus' first coming, Saint Hannibal wanted a yearly renewal of this loving expectancy with a method that would awaken fervor in souls: during the last days of June, The Blessed Sacrament was removed; three times a day, prayers were said and hymns were sung. On July 1, Jesus was welcomed with new names: "King, Pontiff, Father, Good Shepherd, etc." Every year there were new hymns of praise that rose from the heart of Saint Hannibal Di Francia. Thus was formed his book of verses entitled "The Hymns of July First."

Together with the love for Jesus, love for Mary was fostered. The two were never to be separated. "Our least work," he wrote, "must be characterized by love for Mary. Through Mary we obtain graces infallibly, no matter how difficult the matter or desperate the need. It's true that when God closes, as Holy Scripture says, no one opens. But I believe that the Blessed Virgin is an exception. She opens or closes at will." He was noted for propagating the devotion of the "Servitude of Love" taught by St. Louis of Montfort and he embodied the spirit of complete abandonment into the hands of Mary.

External discipline must ease the way for the impulse of grace and cooperate with its action. The child must be surrounded with such vigilant, untiring and paternal supervision and such precautions must be taken as to place him in the moral impossibility of committing faults, which is the touchstone of St. John Bosco's Preventive System of Education. For the professional formation of his boys, he provided boarding schools, schools of arts and crafts, to which he added music in order to develop refinement in his youngsters - hence the reason for his "Orphans' Band," which became very popular.

After their elementary-grade instruction, the girls were involved in sewing, knitting, and home economics in general.

### **His Interior Life**

One day, a venerable bishop pointed out Saint Hannibal to one of his priests and said: "That man has his mind set on becoming a saint!" For him, sanctification was nothing else but to grow day by day in the love of God and in the spirit of total self-giving for Him in the service of one's neighbor.

He lived his faith. He saw everything in God and God in everything: in the duties of his state, and he was scrupulously exact; in the events of his life, and he accepted everything from the hands of God and the greatest adversities did not faze him; in his superiors, and his devotion to the Pope was limitless, which he manifested at times with a more than filial deference. When His Holiness Benedict XV prescribed three days of fasting for the war to end, declaring that he himself would set the example, the Servant of God begged him not to mortify himself in this way, because he and his communities would take up the fast very willingly.

His confidence in the Lord was without limit and he bound himself by a triple vow: 1) never to distrust the goodness and mercy of God regarding his sins, being confident that they all are and will be pardoned (provided that he always has recourse to God with the humble and sincere repentance); 2) amid the miseries, hard times and persecutions which beleaguer his institutions, he will never doubt the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, who will deliver them from ever evil, even working miracles of mercy and of love; 3) trusting in the promises of Jesus, he pledges by vow to believe in the efficacy of prayer, which will always be answered if said with the correct intention, humility, fervor, perseverance, and in union with the adorable will of God.

A spirit of prayer: his whole life was a prayer, and it would require volumes to collect the prayers written by him for the most varied circumstances: he asks Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, the angels and his patron saints for an increase in virtue, growth in divine love, and, with childlike simplicity, he doesn't hesitate to pinpoint his



daily needs: "Today I need quite a bit of money. Take care of it, will You.... We don't have any bread today. Will You bring us some.... That creditor has been pretty good with us. He needs money, and we don't have it to give. So we put ourselves in Your hands...."

Praying this way, it's no wonder that answers came from heaven, often from unexpected ways.

His humility ran very deep: he didn't even want to be called a founder. "God founded the institutions. Jesus and Mary are the divine superiors."

His spirit of mortification was vigorous: we have a veritable collection of scourges, hairshirts, and small chains which he used. He habitually made his food bitter by aloes, knapweed, or some other powder. But his Number One mortification was keeping guard over himself: he measured his words, his looks, his gestures, his smile. He never took a day's vacation, never took an hour off to go for a stroll.

## **Charity**

The peerless virtue of his life, the virtue that characterized him, was charity. He found his happiness in giving and in giving himself for charity. Whatever he had, he wanted to give away: bread, money clothes; and when he had absolutely nothing left to give, he would give a smile, a good word, and the hope that he could give something tomorrow. He would show great distress at not being able to give at the moment. He felt bad about it. In his houses, there must always be on top of the stove the kettle for the poor. No one must ever be sent away without getting help. He found out once that a Mother Superior had sent a poor man away empty-handed, because the house was new and nothing could be found to give. He didn't think her excuse was good enough and ordered to make a "novena of charity," i.e., an extra effort was made for nine days to help the poor who came to the convent. The word got around; and during those days, poor people literally flocked at the gates.

It was true what he wrote about himself with simplicity: "I seem to have a bond of friendship with everyone on earth ... rich or poor, noblemen or workers, the humble and forlorn, or people of high rank. In everyone I see a brother of mine, a noble friend; and the best of everything I've wanted for myself, in this life and the next, I've wanted also for everyone."

His heart was immense: everyone's heartache found there the echo of a keen compassion, and the tears of all the afflicted rushed down into his heart to meet with that river of charity that was forever widening its banks and flowing in ever-increasing abundance. Impoverished families, jobless workers, youth in danger, students unable to continue their studies for lack of means, people in all kinds of straits who were the butt of Fortune seemingly beyond hope: they all came to him, and he gave himself to them 100%. They found a shoulder to cry on a loving father. A more than paternal kindness flowed from his heart for those who belonged directly to the Lord: poor priests and needy communities. The list of monasteries helped by him went on and on.

People really got to know him and they baptized him with a name that reflected what he was: "Father of the Orphans and the Poor." And we cannot forget the meaningful words spoken by a rustic gentlemen on the death of Saint Hannibal: "The mouth that couldn't say No is closed!"

## **Gentleness of Heart**

This narration concludes with several episodes that reveal the tenderness of his heart.

Saint Hannibal noticed in the garden a sheep that had been donated by a benefactor. Now, a poor man came to the door, begging money for himself and for his family. In the meantime there was no bread. But as for money? Saint Hannibal didn't have a cent to his name.

"What kind of work does that man do?" he said. "He's a butcher, Father."

The face of the priest beamed with joy: "Good! Good! Give him the sheep we have. It couldn't be put to better use."

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One day he ordered the kitchen to prepare a banquet. At the appointed time, those who had been invited came in: the flotsam and jetsam of humanity, "kings of rags and patches," who were the regal nobility of his big feast. But the man next to him at table was quite "green" about the rules of etiquette or hygiene and he began dripping from his nose and mouth onto the plate of spaghetti ... In short order, Saint Hannibal exchanged his plate with that of the poor man. The sister who was serving at table noticed everything and let out a gasp of horror ... One look from the priest, and she was silent. He emptied his plate, eating the spaghetti with great relish.

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An old man called "Uncle Jim" had worked in the house for many years. Now he got about with a makeshift gnarled and crooked cane, but it didn't do him much good.

"Poor man!" said the priest when he saw him, "That's not right." The next time he came back to the house, he had with him an elegant walking stick with a curved and smooth handle. He went over to Uncle Jim, bearing a box of chocolates in his other hand: "Here, take these things. I got them just for you."

\*\*\*

He had just arrived at the train station and was riding home in the carriage of the orphanage. It was a humble carriage drawn by a humble donkey and driven by a humble Religious. Traveling with the priest were a coadjutor brother and a sister. It was around twelve o'clock. As they approached the Institute, the priest looked out the cab window and began bowing his head and smiling. He kept this up continuously. The sister sneaked a glance outside the window and noticed to her surprise a crowd of poor people, grimy and tattered, who had just left the orphanage after receiving their daily soup. Saint Hannibal guessed what she was thinking and said, "Sister, don't be alarmed if I act this way. Those poor people out there - we're really their servants, aren't we?"

\*\*\*

Now another story that's worthy of "The Little Flowers" of St. Francis. The snow had fallen thick and heavy, and Saint Hannibal saw through the window a flock of sparrows that were flying about as though lost, looking for food in vain. "Those poor birds out there! They belong to God, too!" And he summoned a coadjutor: "Brother, go get some crumbs to feed those birds!" The brother soon came back with a goodly amount of birdseed. The priest said to him: "That's not enough. Those seeds are going to sink in the snow and get lost."

So a table had to be gotten and, on it, a mini banquet was laid out. The sparrows had a feast in praise of God.

## **Home from Exile**

Troubles over the house in Rome signaled the breakdown of Saint Hannibal's health. He negotiated by himself the transactions involved in purchasing the locale, a complexity of exhaustive dealings to set the place in order, together with having to put up with humidity in rigorous weather - November of 1924 - all these things smote his constitution now worn out less from age than from the flaming zeal of his apostolate. He was stricken with pleurisy. He had his ups and downs with the sickness for about three years. But he never recovered from it.

Saint Hannibal was not one to slacken his activity: his institutions and his orphans remained up to the end his constant concern and preoccupation. And when it was a question of working for the salvation of souls, he drew new energy from the flames of his zeal.

At the same time, his spirit was uniting more intimately with the Lord. "Thank God! Thank God!" he was always heard to say, on all occasions, especially in his pains and adversity. "The adorable will of God be done always!"

Saint Hannibal loved the child Mary with an ardent love and saw to it that in all his houses, she was venerated with special devotion. The Blessed Lady wanted to give him a sign of her heavenly approval. One morning, a few days before his death, his face suddenly lit up and he stared out a point in the room, exclaiming as though rapt: "Brother, look!... Look how beautiful she is! Look at the beautiful child Mary!..." And he remained engrossed in the sweet vision. But the day of the good and faithful servant was now over. The day was June 1, 1927. The time was 6:30 in the morning. The voice of the Lord called him to eternal rest.

The fame of his holiness has been spread far and wide. On 7 October 1990, on the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary and sixty-three years after his death, Pope John Paul II beatified Saint Hannibal Di Francia.

### **Graces and Favors Received Through The Intercession of Saint Hannibal Di Francia.**

Paola Suriano in Lagambam Vibo Valentia, Italy. She was at the point of death owing to an operation for Cesarean birth, and the doctors despaired even of the life of the infant.

With great faith, her relatives turned to Saint Hannibal. Thanks to his intercession, the mother and child now enjoy good health.

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Mrs. Antonietta Pracanica of Messina, Sicily writes: "With sincere thanks I send my offering ... in acknowledgement of having received through the intercession of Saint Hannibal the cure of my husband, whose intestine was punctured as a result of an attack of appendicitis. His chances for surviving were slim. But thanks to the miracle of Saint Hannibal, whom I invoked, the puncture closed up by itself and, after nine days, he was able to return home, cured and without further need of an operation.

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Maria Amante, Messina, Sicily. "My little son was sick, and I was very much worried about his not wanting to eat. He was wasting away before my eyes. I invoked with faith Saint Hannibal and in a short time, my little son was restored to health.

\*\*\*

Francesca Contarino, Lisarow (Sydney), Australia. Hospitalized in advance of being operated on, she was sent home a day before the scheduled operation, being judged clinically cured. The attending physicians considered the event to be miraculous.

She had devotedly besought Saint Hannibal who heard her prayers.

\*\*\*

"I had been feeling quite ill for a long time: lack of energy, asthenia, tiredness and discomfiture that sapped me of my energy. Last month, my condition got worse. I was in bed almost all the time, coughing and feeling extremely weak. A successful and dear friend who was a doctor came to pay me a visit, which I didn't really expect, because I believed it was a form of tiredness that would go away with rest.

During the visit, I understood why the doctor was preoccupied. After giving me a checkup, he wanted some X-rays taken. Unfortunately they revealed a serious illness; and if there was no improvement in my condition, I'd have to have a major operation.

For five months I was hanging between these alternatives. However, I didn't neglect my prayers. I made a novena to Saint Hannibal, imploring him to hear me; and if my prayers were answered, I would have this favor published to help petition for his beatification.

On September 8, the Nativity of Mary, I received the favor. The doctor said I didn't need the operation anymore, because I was completely cured.

I hasten to fulfill my vow, ever thanking the Lord for the favor He granted me through Saint Hannibal... M. La Rocca.

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Giuseppina Savona, Detroit, Michigan. "For five weeks I was suffering from pneumonia and then from pleurisy. I obtained the favor of a cure through the intercession of Saint Hannibal , to who I turned with fervent prayer."

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Francesca Caggiano, East Boston, Massachusetts. "For a favor received through the intercession of Saint Hannibal Di Francia."

## **Prayer to Obtain Graces through the Intercession of Saint Hannibal Di Francia**

**Divine Heart of Jesus,**

**You chose Saint Hannibal to be an Apostle of Prayer for Vocations and filled him with so much love that he became father of orphans and the poor. I beseech you: give me the strength to imitate his virtues and grant me through his intercession the special grace I need ... May everything be for your glory, Lord, and for the greater good of my soul. Amen. (Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory Be...)**

To find out more about Saint Hannibal Di Francia and request biographies, brochures, holy cards or holy relics or to know more about the Rogationist way of life, pleas call or write to:

### **Rogationist Fathers**

#### **Vocation Center Formation House**

9815 Columbus Ave.  
North Hills, CA 91343

(818) 895-8924

#### **Rogationist Fathers**

Newmark Ave.  
Sanger, CA 93657  
(209) 875-5808/2688

#### **Daughters of Divine Zeal**

St. Michael's Convent  
Goshen, New York 10924

#### **Daughters of Divine Zeal**

Hannibal House  
1626 Hill Rd  
Reading, PA 19602

#### **Daughters of Divine Zeal**

379 E. Manning Ave.  
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311 Church St.  
Richmond - Melbourne  
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**Daughters of Divine Zeal**

St. Mel's Kindergarten  
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