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**Notable Vincentians (3):
Brother Angelo Oliva, C.M.**

*[Brother Oliva, the subject of this anonymous biography, is recalled primarily for his work on the building of the Church of the Assumption, Perryville, Missouri. This sketch was originally written for publication in the **Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission**. For whatever reason, his biography never appeared, but remains in manuscript in **Notices VI, 1801-1847**, Archives of Saint Lazare, Paris, pp. 1282-1288. It has been translated, edited and footnoted by John E. Rybolt, C.M.]*

Among the different groups of missionaries sent to America by Father [Francesco Antonio] Baccari, none of them gave more happiness than Brother Oliva, a man full of good sense, forty-six years old and twenty-six years a member of the Community, and enjoying the highest esteem all the confreres. He was an excellent sculptor by profession and well trained in masonry work. When he had learned from Father Baccari what his destination would be, he happily set himself to the task of leaving Naples, the province to which he belonged.

He was born near Vesuvius, and from his youth he had applied himself to work the hard lava of that volcano.¹ At the moment when he was summoned to America, he belonged to the house of Oria of the Province of Naples. All the missionaries esteemed him as an angel from heaven sent to America for the construction of the new church to be built at the Barrens.

He stayed some time at Rome where the expedition was being organized, then he went to Genoa in company with Brothers [John] Sargiano and [Anthony] Palleli and a postulant named Valerio

¹ He was born on New Year's Day, 1777 at Bosco Reale in the diocese of Naples, and entered the Congregation in Naples, 2 December 1797. He made his vows four years later, 25 January 1802. The cause for the delay of two years past the normal time is unknown.

[Faina].² They left Genoa [for Marseilles, and then America] on 1 January 1823, and after three months' sailing they arrived at New Orleans where Father [John Baptist] Acquaroni had replaced Father [Philip] Borgna, who was in Europe at the time.³ He received them with great hospitality and kept Brother Oliva for a month, but he sent the other brothers to the Barrens on their arrival, thereby taking advantage of the favorable situation [i.e., weather]. Brother Oliva waited for the baggage which had been sent to Philadelphia under the protection of Father [Angelo] Inglesi, who took care of it when they left Marseilles.⁴ But because the baggage had not yet arrived, Brother Oliva judged that he should continue his trip, and on November first he reached the Barrens and found, to his great satisfaction, a large community of missionaries there, most of whom were Italians.

He thereupon set to work on the subject of his mission, the construction of the church according to the plan drawn by Father Baccari, and which he brought with him.⁵ And yet, the circum-

² The two brothers both left the Community after some years in America. A contemporary notice on Valerio Faina reads: "When Brother Oliva came from Naples to Rome in 1823, he brought there this young man. He was quite poor, did not have a definite trade, and was uncertain about his future. The brother presented him to Mr. Baccari, and he, after testing him, discovered that he was said to have abilities as a shoemaker and bricklayer. Mr. Baccari did not hesitate to have him undertake the journey with the brother to America, and gave him the title of postulant. When he arrived in America, he worked for four years with our confreres, offering his work for building the church. Later, he said that he wanted to marry, so he separated from the confreres. He received no pay for his work, and continued to repay the expenses of his journey, as he had originally agreed. He always maintained a good relationship with the Community, and with his ability succeeded in becoming rich." Archives of the Postulator General of the Congregation of the Mission, Rome. (Abbrev. APGCM.)

He married Matilda Tucker in Perryville, Missouri, 9 November 1830, had several children by her and a second wife after Matilda's death. He was wealthy enough to own a family of slaves, whom he had baptized. He died in August 1872.

³ Father Acquaroni was the third of the Vincentian priests in the original band to come to America, the others being DeAndreis and Rosati. After some years as a pastor in the Saint Louis area, he returned on family business to Port Maurice in Italy, where he remained. He kept close ties to the Community, but ultimately rejoined his original diocese.

Father Borgna came to the United States in 1818. Assigned to the cathedral of New Orleans, he lived apart from the Community at times, but died as a member.

⁴ Father Inglesi, Bishop DuBourg's vicar general and his nominee to succeed him, betrayed the bishop's confidence, living a scandalous life in Europe while on diocesan business. He reconciled with the Church on his deathbed. Despite his conduct, and his letter scheming in American ecclesiastical affairs, he successfully secured funding and candidates for the diocese.

⁵ Rosati's "Recollections" are more detailed on this point. "Mr. Baccari called Brother [Angelo] Oliva from the house at Oria in the Kingdom of Naples where he was living, had him go to Rome, and kept him with him for a long time in order to have him relearn the practice of his craft and to learn the way to supervise construction. During that time he had him design a nice plan for the church and had a cardboard model made by the same brother, who received from Mr. Baccari himself, who knew architecture perfectly, and from other experts all the instruction necessary for carrying out the object of his mission." Joseph Rosati, C.M., "Recollections of the Establishment of the congregation of the Mission in the United States of America," trans. and annotated by Stafford Poole, C.M., *Vincentian Heritage* 5:1 (1984): 126.

stances hardly corresponded to his good will. The means were lacking; he had only his hands and still waited for the tools which were in the baggage. The most necessary means was also missing, namely, money, especially since Father Rosati, who had just been made a bishop, could not give the necessary aid toward the construction. Brother Oliva, however, did not waste time, and he promptly set himself to do the only thing he could do under the circumstances, preparing the materials. They had thought about making the entire construction out of brick, but a fortunate chance made them abandon this plan because they found at a short distance and at close to the surface, a thick layer of good stone which resembled marble.⁶

Such a happy discovery encouraged him to have the stone brought out and in the meantime, God permitted the long awaited baggage finally to arrive. It brought the tools, and with this help and the aid of the quarry, they soon found some beautiful stone, which could not have fallen into the hands of a better artist than Brother Oliva. With the help of certain young people of the vicinity whom he instructed, he spent almost two years preparing for the construction: digging the foundation and transporting the stones, without any help other than what the poverty of the inhabitants could procure. Sometimes even he lent his own arms. Seminarians and sometimes even Bishop Rosati, lately consecrated, worked there with their own hands.

After two or three years of preparation the time came to begin the main work, and so he set to work in the spring of 1829. Bishop Rosati succeeded, although at great expense, in gathering a larger group of laborers and with the earnest help of Father Odin, whom Bishop Rosati had appointed supervisor of the work, the walls rose quickly to three feet above ground. Although they had used only the good stones found in the vicinity and prepared in advance, they still needed time to make bricks. The raising of the walls progressed slowly. At length, in the spring of 1834, the building was roofed over and yet they needed some years more to finish it, and to make it suitable for the liturgy. Bishop Rosati committed a sum of 13,000 *écus* for this construction. Father Baccari in Rome set aside a similar sum. In addition, the house of the Barrens itself had a good part of the work done by its twelve seminarians.

When the church was finished, to everyone's great satisfaction, Brother Oliva, who had contributed more than anyone by his

⁶ Announced in a letter of Rosati to Baccari, 11 April 1823. APGCM.

constancy and patience in continuing a work so thankless on account of the difficulty of procuring the means, became even more the object of the esteem and admiration of all the missionaries. Ever since his arrival in America, people had conceived the idea of how advantageous he was. Bishop Rosati wrote at one point to Father Baccari that "Brother Oliva is a treasure in every respect; he has won the esteem of all those whom he knew at New Orleans, and here at the Barrens, of all the community."⁷ Bishop Rosati never changed his language whenever he spoke of him in his letters. For instance, in a confidential letter to Father Baccari, written the 18th of January 1826, he said of him, "The brothers, and especially the Italians, give me much to do ... except in particular Brother Oliva who is a real treasure."

Bishop Rosati was alluding here to that evil humor which the demon had already awakened in many of his subjects, especially in the Italian brothers concerned about their situation. In fact, obliged as they were to live amid a crowd of young people, both [secular] collegians and seminarians thrust together for lack of room, which did not allow the necessary separations, and also because they learned only a little [about the mission] while still in their houses in Italy, they quickly forgot the Rule, and lost the spirit of their state. They fell into a spirit of inconceivable murmuring, and said to whoever wanted to listen that they had had the occasion of making a good foundation in Lower Louisiana where the land was fertile; that they should abandon the Barrens where the land was sterile and they were exposed to excesses of cold and heat; that Bishop [Louis William] Dubourg had not kept the agreements made at Rome with Father [Carlo Domenico] sicardi; and that the superiors were capricious and had dissipated the resources which came from Europe, so that it was impossible to accomplish anything. Because of such murmuring from the beginning, they nearly ruined the establishment. Similar comments, which, pride, self-love and lack of mortification introduced under the guise of zeal among the missionaries of the Barrens, furnished the subject of a multitude of complaints sent to the vicar general in Rome and led to requests to return to Italy. This dangerous outbreak came to a head when Father [John Baptist] Tornatore arrived. Amid these complaints,

⁷ Rosati to Baccari, Barrens, 9 December 1823. APGCM.

Brother Oliva always remained full of firmness and constancy, as mentioned in Bishop Rosati's letter.⁸

The church was finally finished at the end of 1837. Bishop Rosati celebrated a solemn consecration on the 27th of October of that year. This ceremony spread great joy in the hearts of all, but especially in good Brother Oliva who saw finally a wonderful honor rendered to his labors.⁹

He was a man of great virtue, as one can judge by the following example. With great care and much difficulty he had worked on a fine stone for a pilaster at the door of the new church. He had the seminarians pull another up with the help of some pulleys and cords, when the first stone hit the second one and it fell to the ground and shattered. Everyone except him in a similar accident would have raised their voice and uttered bitter complaints, but Brother Oliva always maintained his composure and did not even raise his eyes to heaven, but quietly asked, "Where will we now find a similar piece?" He had a truly extraordinary talent; he knew how to make water clocks, and sand clocks, and sun dials.¹⁰ To know how skilled a sculptor he was, one has only to look at the lovely marble chandeliers he carved, and which were placed atop the facade of the cathedral of Saint Louis.¹¹

He died at the Barrens January 21, 1839 [*sic*, 1835], age 58, 38 years a Vincentian brother.

⁸ The author of this sketch either did not know or passed over the letter of Brothers Oliva, Blanka and Vanucci, expressing their complaints against Tornatore's harsh regime as their superior. Oliva, Blanka and Vanucci to Baccari, Barrens, 30 July 1832. AFGCM. Tornatore had arrived 6 January 1831, to become Rosati's successor as superior of the house and of the entire American mission.

⁹ The author erred on Oliva's death date. He died 21 January 1835, not 1839, and did not live to see the dedication of the church, 29 (not 27) October 1837. Rosati, "Recollections": "Alas! He did not have the consolation of seeing it finished. He died on the vigil, as it were, of the day that should have crowned his efforts." *Vincentian Heritage* 5:1 (1984): 128.

¹⁰ It is probably to him that the large sundial on the south wall of the Church of the Assumption is due. He is also traditionally credited with carving the two sacrania in the sacristies of the same church; they bear the date 1830 carved in them. Rosati's "Recollections" mention "amazement throughout the countryside over the first results of his work and everyone would admire the magnificent stones thirteen or fourteen feet long and of a proportionate thickness that he cut with beautiful moldings for the main door." *Vincentian Heritage*, 5:1 (1984): 127. (This carving no longer exists.)

¹¹ An obituary in the (Philadelphia) *Catholic Herald*, 8 March 1935, adds the following details: "The six candelabra which ornament the front of the Cathedral of St. Louis were cut by him, also the beautiful jamb, architrave, ornaments and inscription of the door of the new Church of St. Genevieve and the altar and steps of the Old Mines." Reprinted in *American Catholic Historical Researches* n.s. 2 (1906): 94. (None of this work has survived.)

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Saint Vincent de Paul

It is enough that God sees our hearts.

Saint Vincent de Paul

God makes the interests of the afflicted his own.

Saint Louise de Marillac