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The “First” Justin De Jacobis

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Infancy

Justin De Jacobis was born in San Fele on 9 October 1800. His father, John Baptist, orphaned when he was eight months old, was entrusted together with two sisters, to his paternal grandmother, and to his priest-uncle, Sebastian. Very early on he had to involve himself in his hereditary landed property, and even though inclined to study, he was unable to obtain any degree. On 10 August 1790, John Baptist wed Mary Josephine Muccia, the daughter of a notary, who was to bear him fourteen children: eight boys and four girls, born in San Fele, and two boys born in Naples. Fate was not very kind to the large family: only five boys were able to survive. Justin, the seventh child, spent the most beautiful part of his life, his infancy, in San Fele, where he received his primary education and first sacraments. Little Justin’s first and most influential teacher was his mother, a pious woman of great virtue, who by word and, more importantly, by example handed on to him Christian sentiments and introduced him to the Gospels.

As a child, Justin’s life was in peril on two occasions. The first time when he was one year-old, the result of a grave illness. His mother, realizing the gravity of the situation, consecrated him to God, praying that he would save her son, if his life would be useful to the Church; otherwise she would be willing to make the sacrifice of losing him. Her prayers were to be answered.

The second time when a little older, Justin was in danger of being hurled from atop of a cliff while on a mule that had panicked. Once more his mother, helpless in the face of what was happening, desperately pleaded for help. As a result, the mule miraculously halted at the edge of the cliff and Justin was saved for the second time.

He grew up nurtured by the love of his pious mother in a typical region of the Mezzogiorno (southern Italy), poor in material wealth, but rich in human and Christian resources. Like one large family, the inhabitants of the village, lived in the realization of each other’s condition, and Justin showed from that time on a particular concern for the poorest and for the suffering. He had a lively and playful character, but a remarkable inclination to reflection prevailed over the typical attitudes of children of his age and it was surely for this reason that he earned the nickname, “old man.”

In the spring of 1813, when Justin was twelve, John Baptist De Jacobis decided to relocate his family to Naples.

Was it because of political, financial, or family reasons? Or was it for the need of greater economic security or stability? Was it to give his children the possibility of receiving a good education with which to attain a profession after the example of the grandfathers and uncles?

We cannot exclude from this decision certain political happenings in which he was involved. In 1799 John Baptist De Jacobis had embraced the *Repubblica Partenopea*, and had fought in its territory against the soldiers of Cardinal Ruffo, who fought for the return to Naples of the Bourbon sovereigns. After the return of the Bourbon Ferdinand I to the throne of Naples (1814), notwithstanding his exoneration, John Baptist was always considered a “state offender,” even though he was never incarcerated.

As a result of this situation he found that he no longer had the possibility of employment in public administration, he who previously, by his 360 ducats of revenue, was one of the 304 property owners in the region. He could have become a candidate to the national parliament and to the highest state offices.

With the arrival of Joseph Bonaparte and Joachim Murat in Naples, he perhaps foresaw the possibility of a good outcome in that city.

Political events, however, did not move in the direction that he had hoped, starting a period of decline for the family that had prided itself on its prestigious past. John Baptist was not able to save himself from want but, in compensation, had the satisfaction of seeing his sons Nicholas and Donato Anthony become noted professionals, the first in letters, the second a civil lawyer, while Vincent, Justin and Philip became churchmen, one a Carthusian, the others both Vincentians.

In Naples, Justin continued his studies, and together with a literary and humanistic formation, he looked after his spiritual life by prayer and reception of the sacraments under the guidance of the Carmelite Father Mariano Cacace, to whom he was entrusted by his mother.

The Seminary

The wise Carmelite perceived that his spiritual son had a calling to consecrated life. When Justin made known his decision to consecrate himself to God, not being able to have him admitted to his own community which had been

dispersed because the government of Naples had suppressed religious institutes in 1809, he directed Justin towards the Vincentian Missionaries.

At age 18, Justin for the first time enters the house “dei Vergini” (so called because of its location on the piazza of the same name.), the Provincial House, and the site of the novitiate of the Vincentian missionaries. There he entered and stayed.

The words with which Cacace presented him to the director, Fr. Francis Xavier Pellicciari, are happily prophetic: “I am glad to offer a gift to your Congregation, and experience will prove it to you.”

On 17 October 1818, Justin is admitted to the novitiate, which would prepare him for future missionary life and for priestly ministry in service to the poor, according to the *Vincentian charism*. He observed everything with regularity and with benefit to himself. For his simplicity, his availability and above all for his humility, he was given a nickname in the seminary, “Brother You do it.” “*You do it*” was Justin’s typical answer to his companions when it came time to decide something. Maybe it was a game, being convinced that others could have done it better than he, and then not wanting in any way that his position might displease someone.

These attitudes and convictions are not to be misunderstood with disinterestedness, apathy or weakness, but to be understood in the light of that *positive indifference and interior freedom*, at the cost even of self-mortification, which constitute the essential points of St. Vincent de Paul’s spirituality into which De Jacobis was allowing himself to be formed with docility.

In the seminary he solidified a friendship with Vincent Spaccapietra, a friendship born when they both attended the public schools, and had started to share the same ideals, the same vocation. Vincent Spaccapietra entered the “dei Vergini” house a year after Justin. It is he who has given us some interesting views on how his friend lived out the novitiate. His conduct, Spaccapietra tells us, was impeccable. It was not possible to find any fault in him. Above all, he adopted humility as his favorite virtue. Justin manifested especially a deep veneration for the Virgin, and always had edifying stories calculated to arouse love and confidence in Our Lady.

“Regarding his studies, although his abilities were not mediocre, he enjoyed talking about his shortcomings.” Spaccapietra tells us this to make us understand that probably De Jacobis did not have a subtle, speculative mind. He was not the intellectual type, but without doubt had a great clarity of ideas, and the capacity to grasp quickly and to express the essentials with simplicity. These are qualities which, his life will show, will make him suitable for and flexible in

many and varied tasks which will be entrusted to him in the community and the Church.

His inadequacy, of which he loved to speak, the little confidence in his own ability, even led Justin to doubt that he would be suited for the priestly ministry.

Fortunately the convictions of those close to him and of his superiors were quite different, having had the opportunity to verify the contrary. They therefore denied his request to remain in the community as a simple coadjutor brother, and sent him to Oria (Brindisi).

He was admitted to sacred orders in October 1823, ordained a deacon on 13 March 1824, and with a dispensation for his age was ordained a priest in the Cathedral of Brindisi on 12 June of the same year.

Apostolate in his own country

The activities to which Justin devoted himself at the outset of his ministry were naturally those characteristic of the Congregation, above all the preaching of missions to the people. But he was also an enlightened director of souls, an effective preacher of spiritual exercises to varied groups of people (religious, professional, clerical); he was attentive in the assistance the sick and the poor in keeping with the word and example of the Founder; moreover, he dedicated himself to the formation and animation of the *Companies of Charity*, women's groups or mixed organizations for the service and assistance of the needy.

De Jacobis' stay in Puglia lasted about 13 years; he lived in Oria for a few years, (1824-1829), he was then among the confreres who opened a mission house in Monopoli (1829-1833), and after a brief interlude in Naples for health reasons, we find him again in Puglia, at Lecce (1834-1836).

The simplicity which always characterized him, humility for which he had a predilection and exercised more than the others, meditation and prayer which always preceded all his actions, his great availability towards everyone without reserve, could not but result in much admiration; whoever had the occasion to hear him and know him was fascinated by his person. He was a *special man* because his mode of life was not easily found in other men, but was also special because people could see themselves in him when faced with very difficult situations.

One evening in the winter of 1831 in Monopoli while making his usual preparation before preaching to the faithful, a messenger came from Fasano to tell him that a penitent of his was gravely ill, and that his life was in danger, and

wished to see him. After the sermon, Justin mounted his horse, and accompanied by the messenger, took off for the house of the dying person. It was a good distance on that cold and dark night. Their lantern was barely adequate to penetrate the darkness. The journey was not without difficulty when suddenly the wind extinguished the lantern, stopping the travelers in their tracks.

There was no moon, no stars, not even a glimmer of light to mark the way. The guide could no longer orient himself and began to fear the worst, but Justin reassured him and invited him to pray to the Virgin. Their prayers were heard, and a halo of light surrounded the travelers, allowing them to go on. At Fasano he heard the sick man's confession, and assured him that he was not about to die. He, in fact, lived for 30 more years.

This was an extraordinary happening, and the witness did not hesitate to make it public, relating how the light that made the journey possible came from his honorable companion. Naturally Justin was asked to explain and, convinced that what had happened was God's doing and not his own, minimized the event saying that the light in question was, in all probability, generated by a nocturnal meteor.

Because of the admirable way in which he exercised his ministry so few years after his ordination, Justin was entrusted with important tasks: he was a delegate from the house in Oria to the Provincial Assembly in preparation for the General Assembly of 1829; superior of the house in Lecce, director of novices at St. Nicholas of Tolentine in Naples, and, also in Naples, superior of the "dei Vergini" house where he began his odyssey of service to the gospel, to the poor and to the Church.

Always opposed to being assigned a task, or of holding an office because of the humble esteem he had of himself, he lived these responsibilities in the spirit of obedience and service, never with arrogance, making his own the evangelical teaching: "He who wishes to be first will be last."

Naturally everything did not always go for the better: illnesses sometimes afflicted him; differing views, opinions, plans put him at odds with his confreres, even causing humiliations from his superiors. His attitude, gentle yet resolute, condescending but consistent, sometimes set him up "against the current," beyond the rigid outlines of a mentality needing to open itself up to the new, but fearful to do so for the general difficulty of finding balance and stability on the part of a Church, a religious life, and a society still marked by the storm of the French Revolution and by the Napoleonic dictatorship.

We are told that one day a young man presented himself at the St. Nicholas House desiring and curious to meet personally the director of novices

about whom he had heard so much. He wanted his advice about the possibility of entering the seminary. At the entrance, he found the one he wanted to see busy cleaning the church and never imagined that one to be the very person he was looking for. Mistaking him for the sacristan, he asked if he could see the director. Justin asked why he would want to speak with him. The young man explained why he came. The “presumed” sacristan assured him that the person he was speaking to was really no one special. Then with a most affectionate smile, Justin revealed his true identity.

He did not disdain doing work which by its very nature should have been done by others, and when this happened he did it very naturally.

This great availability nonetheless did not prevent him, when necessary, from being strict and from exercising his authority decisively. When he believed in an idea or program for the good of the community, he even ran the risk of being reprimanded by superiors, in spite of the fact that this might be for him a cause of great suffering.

In his country Justin worked in an historical time in which the social, political and economic atmosphere still experienced the effects of revolutions and agitations which beset southern Italy. It was thus not easy to put into practice the foundational principal of the Vincentian congregation: to bring the gospel to the people.

But the simple manner of preaching according to the Vincentian “little method,” without rhetoric, his availability, and the example of life that preceded and confirmed every teaching, earned him esteem, admiration and affection both from the poor people as well as from the “gentlemen.”

Among the upper class, the Marchioness Elena Dell’Antoglietta of Fragagnano, especially, was struck by Justin’s charism and became, besides his most faithful penitent, a valued collaborator and benefactor for many years. She helped in fact, to found the *Company of Charity* in Puglia and in the many works benefiting the poor. When she came to know of the difficult economic state of her confessors’ family, she strove with discretion in every possible way to help it.

For this Justin showed her his deep gratitude.

In the years 1836-1837 a cholera epidemic broke out in Naples. He was there, day and night without reserve to assist the victims even to endangering his own life. He forgot himself to the extent that he had no time to eat even a piece of bread. One morning he was found asleep, worn out by fatigue, near a victim whom he had assisted until that person’s death, giving no thought to the

contagion, which did not touch him in spite of his contact with so many of the afflicted.

The end of the cholera coincided with a procession organized by Justin in honor of the Immaculate Mother, which made its way through the narrow, heavily populated streets of the so-called *Spanish Quarter*. The disease was now defeated. The people saw in this “coincidence” an answer finally to so many prayers confidently raised up to heaven and the news of the *miracle* spread quickly from mouth to mouth. The prodigious statue of the Madonna is still housed in the Church of St. Nicholas of Tolentine in Naples.

After the experience of the cholera, Justin was deeply stricken by two great sorrows: the death of his father (after a brief and violent illness, perhaps the cholera, on 26 October 1837), and that of his mother (20 June 1838).

Across the Sea

In October 1838 Cardinal Philip Franzoni, Prefect of Propaganda Fide, had the opportunity of personally meeting Justin while the latter was superior at the “dei Vergini” house. Franzoni related to him some favorable accounts that Fr. Joseph Sabeto had transmitted to him from Ethiopia, recommending that there be no delay in resuming the evangelization of that land.

Franzoni was taken by Justin’s personality, rich in humanity and virtue; what is more, he was supported by the favorable attitude that he showed concerning the possibility of having to – he himself – tackle the African undertaking. A docile son of obedience, the holy missionary posed but one condition: “Only if the Superior General of my Congregation gives his consent will Abyssinia be my new and dear fatherland.”

When he returned to Rome, the Cardinal started considering De Jacobis as the suitable person to build up the newborn mission of Abyssinia. He wrote to Paris entrusting to the Congregation of St. Vincent de Paul this new mission and to have the authorization of the Superior General to assign De Jacobis to Abyssinia, together with another confrere endowed with the requisite qualities.

Justin was enthused at the prospect. He indeed for a long time held dear the possibility of going to the foreign missions, but at age 38 could he still realize the dream? He hoped, furthermore that going to Africa would have definitively distanced him from the “threat” of being named a bishop. This was something that he suspected might happen, and absolutely did not want to face. no matter that he could have carried out important obligations with great competence, the humble *priest of the mission* remained convinced that he was unworthy of such consideration. How could he who did not even consider himself to be a *good priest*, imagine himself being a bishop?

Gripped by a painful interior conflict, Justin thought and prayed thus in 1838: *“At the time that I had dismissed every hope of being sent to the foreign missions, a burning apprehension, which took possession of my spirit, tormented me ... During my sufferings, during my poor acts of thanksgiving after the celebration of the divine mysteries, I often repeated this prayer: I will never consent, my God, to be consecrated, except only in the case of a new mission, which has great need of a bishop.”*

He could not imagine that Providence would take him at his word, wanting him to be a bishop in Ethiopia, in a land and within a history where the “episcopal purple” rather than being an honor, was to be a burden on his shoulders.

Preceded by the necessary preparations, having met the Superior General in Paris, and in Rome having received the instructions and indications to follow for reaching and settling down in Abyssinia, the Prefect Apostolic for Ethiopia, Justin De Jacobis, together with Fr. Luigi Montuori and several French confreres, on their way to the mission of the Orient, undertook the long journey towards the land that was to become his second fatherland.

They embarked at Civitavecchia. It was 24 May 1839, the Feast of Mary, Help of Christians.

(STEPHEN INDIA, C.M., Translator)