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FOR THE GLORY OF THE FATHER

A biography of
Mother Eugenia Elisabetta Ravasio

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(A biography of Mother Eugenia Elisabetta Ravasio 1907-1990)

On the front cover
Mother Eugenia Elisabetta Ravasio

PREFACE

The lamp must be placed on the candlestick so that all may see it. For this reason we are writing a brief outline on mother Eugenia Elisabetta Anna Ravasio, who we consider one of the greatest lights of our times: she is the great little prophet of a new Church, in which the FATHER is at the centre and apex of all mankind and in which UNITY is the highest ideal of spirituality.

She is the light which the Father has sent into the world in these times of chaos and darkness so that we may see the road that must be followed. The darkness did not comprehend it and tried to put it out, but the light was stronger than the darkness and now it must shine in its fullness.

Who is mother Eugenia?

She has such a rich personality that we cannot describe her in a few pages. Apart from her spiritual qualities, her work in the social field alone would suffice to ensure her a place in history.

In twelve years of missionary activity she opened over 70 centres - each with infirmary, school and church - in the remotest spots of Africa, Asia and Europe.

She discovered the first medicine for the cure of leprosy, extracting it from the seed of a tropical plant: leprosy was defeated thanks to her discovery which was developed further at the Pasteur Institute in Paris.

She encouraged the apostolate of Raoul Follereau who, following in her footsteps and building the foundations laid by her, is regarded as the apostle of the lepers.

During the period 1939-41 she conceived, planned and brought to fruition the project for a "Lepers' City" at Adzopé (Ivory Coast). This was a vast centre, covering an area of 200,000 sq. m. for the care of leprosy sufferers. It remains even today one of Africa's and the world's leading centres of its kind.

In recognition of this achievement, France conferred the Couronne Civique, the highest national honour for social work, on the Congregation of Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles, of which Mother Eugenia was Superior General from 1935 to 1947.

We do not intend to write a classic biography. It would be impossible for many reasons, especially because most of the documentation is jealously preserved in the archives of the Curia in Grenoble and the Holy Office in Rome. We must limit ourselves to the few episodes, anecdotes and information which we were able to obtain from our interviews with the Mother and with the people who knew her: there are very few of them here in Italy because she carried out her work mainly in France, Africa and other parts of the world.

Our testimony is of love and gratitude for how much she fought and suffered for the coming of the kingdom of the Father, for the birth of a new Church and so that all may finally be one: all "children in the Son".

BETTINA IS BORN

San Gervasio d'Adda (now Capriate San Gervasio) is a small town in the province of Bergamo, Italy, near Sotto il Monte where Pope John XXIII was born.

At the beginning of the century the Ravasio family was one of the most distinguished families in town, both for their moral qualities and for their economic standing; a great patriarchal family composed of more than 80 members who were gathered into a single ancient farmhouse which still exists today. This family had made quite a good fortune by raising cattle and silkworms. With the bankruptcy of the bank of Vaprio d'Adda, in which all the family's money was kept, the situation suddenly comes to a head.

In the atmosphere of "every man for himself" which results, it becomes necessary to divide the survivor goods, and the great Ravasio tree is divided into many stumps. Grandfather Piero remains with his son Carlo, Bettina's father, and with the latter's six children: Giovanna (who died at the age of one and a half), Teresa, Luigi, Lorenzo, Giovanni, Angelo and Francesco.

The most bitter day is when the notary arrives for the division. The atmosphere is tense and grandfather Piero, a marvellous figure who we will come back to, says to Carlo: "My son, today the notary is coming. Let us go to work in the fields; when we come back we will see what they have left us". When they return they find three heads of cattle in the sta-

ble and a chair in the house. Grandfather Piero gathers together the nine members of the family and sings the “Magnificat” of thanksgiving to Our Lady.

The family has to start all over again. The father continues to work, but it is difficult to make ends meet with six children, the eldest being just 16, and another on the way. They are on the verge of poverty.

The mother, perhaps as a consequence of so much misfortune, becomes ill with jaundice and gives birth to her last child before completing the sixth month of pregnancy. Elisabetta is born on 4 September 1907, but at home they will always celebrate on the 8th, the feast of the Nativity of Mary.

After giving birth, her mother falls ill with typhus fever and then typhoid bronchitis and she is on the verge of dying. The little baby, in anticipation of her mother's death which the doctor says is close at hand, is baptized immediately with the name of Elisabetta Anna.

In the meanwhile she is arranged on a chest, in a wooden soap box adapted as a crib, and she is nourished as is possible.

All the treatments and all the prayers are to snatch mother Felicita from death; she doesn't die, but she will always remain weak, very nervous and will be bedridden for seven years. With the passing of time she will be able to get up, but she will barely be able to take care of cooking.

Bettina's birth coincided with the family's darkest moments and all around her the newborn finds nothing but anguish, poverty and pain: for her who will live to be “the smile of God” there is not even a smile at her entrance into the world.

She lies in her little soap box, alive in spite of the doctor and logic: she eats almost nothing, she has a very slow growth and her weight is insignificant; at the age of four she still doesn't talk or walk. But she is alive.

Grandfather Piero

At this point grandfather Piero comes onto the scene. Having become a widower at the age of 27 with three children (Carlo, Bettina's father, Giovanni and Virginia, who will later on become a nun with the name of sister Anna Vetusta), he doesn't remarry and he begins a life which we can easily call ascetic without doing injustice to any spiritual expert. He dedicates all his attention to his children, for whom he is a father and a mother, to work and above all to the sanctification of his own soul. Every morning he goes to church for Mass and Communion and in the afternoon he goes back for vespers, for the benediction and for the recitation of the rosary which - an inalienable privilege - he begins and leads with a powerful voice.

Under his guidance the farmhouse becomes a convent: at dawn he goes to the middle of the courtyard and wakes everybody up with the recitation of the Angelus Domini and with morning prayers. And everyone must respond. In the evening he gathers everyone together for the rosary, evening prayers (“*which never ended*” mother Eugenia says with a smile), spiritual reading and catechism. When at times he cannot be present, he delegates his son Carlo to substitute him.

Every Sunday, early in the morning, he leads the whole family to Mass, first the read one and then the sung one with a homily; after lunch back to church for catechism, vespers, the homily and the recitation of the rosary at the cemetery and lastly, at home, the rosary and evening prayers. Mother Eugenia remembers that this rhythm of daily and Sunday devotions didn't change until she entered the convent.

Grandfather Piero, tired of seeing that bundle of flesh lying always inside that box, without talking, without growing and without moving, decides to resolve the matter in his own way. He goes to the foot of the sanctuary of the Sacro Monte in Varese, determined to have a talk with Our Lady: either she heals his granddaughter or else she takes her back. He arrives there around midnight.

At that same time Bettina sees a very beautiful lady, dressed in dark colours, come near her box; she called her “Cea”. “Cea” is a very distinguished woman who occasionally goes to visit the Ravasio family, and “Cea” is one of the few words the child can pronounce. The lady tells her to get up and go to her mommy, and so she gets out of the box, jumps down from the chest, runs to pull the covers from her mother's bed and says to her: “The Cea told me to get up and come to you”. Then she goes back to her box and stays there like a good girl without moving anymore, among the comprehensible astonishment of her parents.

Grandfather Piero, hoping for the un hoped-for, is on his way home and is about to reach town. The “Cea” comes to visit the little girl again and this time she orders her to go toward her grandfather: “*You will meet him under the plane trees, before the church*”.

Bettina obeys, jumps down again, goes outside and starts running along the road which leads to the church situated at the other end of town. She is wearing a red dress with frills on her shoulders, and she is more than once knocked down by a few turkeys that peck at those frills. She gets up, starts running again and meets her grandfather under the plane trees of the church. Grandfather Piero, beside himself with joy, takes the child in his arms, goes to call the pastor don Benigno Carrara and makes him ring the bells; then he goes to the altar of the Virgin Mary to sing the litany of thanksgiving.

Bettina, who has miraculously begun to walk, run and speak, surpasses herself by starting to sing the litany - in Latin - with a silvery voice which will forever resound in the ears of the pastor who, as long as he lives, will tell everyone about this extraordinary episode.

At nursery school: the first choice

After the first comprehensible surge of amazement that this event brings to her townspeople and relatives, everything slowly returns to normal and

Bettina is sent to nursery school. For many years she stands out only because she is much thinner and smaller than average, and no one knows the numerous trials she will have to undergo spiritually and materially.

The first trial awaits her at the end of the school year, when the nuns ask the children to choose which craft they prefer to give their parents for the end of the year feast: a basket, a frame with their own photo or a frame with the Sacred Heart. She eliminates the basket right away, and the two frames remain on the list: me or the Sacred Heart? It seems a trivial matter, but for Bettina it is an existential choice between herself and God:

“I would have really liked a picture of myself, since it would have been the first picture in my life! But if I put my picture I couldn't put Jesus... I was so undecided, but in the end I said: No, that's enough, the others have chosen their picture, I want Jesus! And so I made a frame with the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus”.

This is her first struggle and her first victory. From now on her hesitations disappear, and she will go ahead on the road she has chosen - Jesus - always more determined.

When I am older I will be...

In the Ravasio family it is time for spiritual reading. Father Carlo is reading the story of some missionaries and the numerous conversions they managed to obtain with their sacrifices and their heroic charity.

As he continues to read he sees that Bettina becomes sadder, so he asks her if she is feeling sick and he tells her to go to her room. He receives an answer which he doesn't expect:

“No, daddy, I'm not sick; but I'm thinking that when I am older all the people on earth will be converted and I won't have anything else to do on my mission!” “But you are so little, you can't understand these things”.

The little girl climbs onto a chair and says: *“Daddy, when I am older I will become a missionary!”* - *“But first you must eat a lot of polenta...”* concludes father Carlo smiling.

Bettina is little and no one takes her seriously, but she has clear ideas: she will eat *“a lot of”* polenta without bread, but when she is older she will become a missionary, just as she had decided.

First Communion

In May 1913 a messenger of the pastor brings unexpected news to the Ravasio family: little Elisabetta must go to the parish church on the following day to receive her First Communion.

This is strange, because the other children are ten years old and they have received a long catechistic preparation, while Bettina knows nothing about catechism and she isn't seven years old yet. But the pastor's orders must not be questioned:

“Grandfather started preparing me to receive Jesus. The next day my mother dressed me in a white dress I had already worn, she fixed it up with a white veil on my head and a light blue sash. I went to church and at Communion time I went to the altar too, but when the pastor came to me he hesitated because, even though I was standing up, I was shorter than the others who were kneeling. However, he gave me Holy Communion just the same, and then I withdrew to a corner of the church to talk to Jesus, as my grandfather told me to do: I felt something great, an arcane feast, an immense joy, an immeasurable love for Jesus, I felt heaven was inside me and with me, everything was singing, it was a great mystery of splendour”.

At the end of the ceremony she returns home and abruptly regains contact with earth: *“At home I didn't find anything different from other days; everyone was taken up by their usual Sunday chores. They only asked me if I was happy and they urged me not to dirty my dress”.*

Later on the pastor calls Bettina and asks her why she went to receive Communion. They therefore discover that there was an error of homonymy with a cousin of hers, but in God's plans there are no such errors: Jesus wanted to take possession of his Bettina and He found the way to reach his goal.

It is God's style that at Fatima, three years later, He allows an angel give First Communion to three shepherd children who are neither the official age nor have a sufficient catechistic preparation. God's way of acting should make us think about the importance of allowing small children to receive Communion, *“when they begin the age of reason and distinguish good from evil”*, as the Holy Pontiff Pius X said when he established the age of seven as the suitable age. Today children can *“distinguish good from evil”* a great deal before, with the logical consequence that they should be able to receive First Communion at around the age of five. Why are we returning to the age of nine or ten?

Confirmation

After a few months Bettina receives her Confirmation. This time it isn't the pastor's messenger who makes an error, but the rulers of the whole world who have decided to make war. Not knowing how things would end, the Bishop of Bergamo orders all children aged seven and older to receive their Confirmation:

“I did a bit of catechism. My sponsor fell ill and died the day before my Confirmation. A relative of mine accompanied me hastily to receive my Confirmation, then she brought me back home and offered me a glass of wine (which I didn't accept), then she took off my white dress and went back to her housework. At home I found my mother who was better and everyone was at work just like any other day. I started to do my housework and in the meantime my friends were still celebrating with their gifts and I with tears in my eyes. I only savoured the intimate joy of the sacrament I had received with the Bishop's anointing”.

With what bitterness does mother Eugenia recall that “*glass of wine*”, the only gift her improvised sponsor gave her! However, she also has a vivid memory of what the Bishop said on that occasion, because “*grandpa Piero always used to tell me those words*”:

“The Homeland has called its soldiers to war in its defence. Jesus has made you his soldiers so that you may defend your soul and always keep it pure. You have received the Holy Spirit a while ago and he will always be with you to fight against the enemy...”

Only God knows how many battles Bettina will have to fight.

Heaven and earth in Bettina

The prevailing characteristics which emerge in Bettina on the occasion of these two encounters with the supernatural are the extremes of a splendour of light which illumine and dilate the Heaven of her spirit (“immense joy”, “Heaven in me”, “a great mystery of splendour”; “I savoured the internal joys of the ineffable sacrament”) and the profound bitterness which immediately after strikes the earth of her sensitive humanity (“at home there wasn't anything different from any other day”, “they urged me not to dirty my dress”; “she offered me a glass of wine (which I didn't accept), she took off my white dress and went about her housework”, “my friends were still celebrating with their gifts and I with tears in my eyes”).

We highlight these two realities because they are the leitmotif of Mother Eugenia's life. The greater the ascents of her spirit, the more dreadful the impact with the realities that follow. This is the way in which the Father moulds this only daughter of his by bringing her as far as incandescence in the heavens of her spirit, and then lowering her in the ice-cold water of earthly realities.

The result will be a tower of strength against which the powers of hell will be able to do nothing although they will try to destroy it. Under the

continuous and heavy blows, her humanity will deteriorate and she will carry the signs of the numerous battles she fought, but she will remain firm in her witness of love and faithfulness to the Father for whose glory she has offered everything.

Calvary begins

The temperament which Bettina receives is exceptionally hard. She is now a normal child, who walks and talks like other girls, only that she is physically less developed than average. In contrast with her small stature, a large cross awaits her and it will accompany her for the rest of her life.

She finds her cross right away, at home. Her sister Teresa married when she was five and her mother, being ill and therefore unable to carry out all the housework, remained without the help of her eldest daughter and therefore slowly teaches Bettina to do the work, making her do practically everything, except the cooking.

Bettina washes the dishes, does the shopping, tidies up the house by coming up with original ways to make the beds which are too big for her. This is already a lot for a little girl and furthermore a feeble girl, but it is child's play compared to how hard it is for her to do the laundry. The washtub is the Adda river, which runs a thirty-minute walk away, and Bettina has to go there twice a week with baskets of laundry on her small shoulders, which because of this heavy weight will undergo a slight deformity which she will have for the rest of her life.

And then there is the cold weather, that dreadful cold which makes her little hands swell and freezes them, forcing her to use her teeth to turn the socks, belonging to the seven men who are at home, inside out. The greatest problem is wringing the sheets and she works this out with the help of the other women who also go to the river and who are touched when they see that little girl struggling with clothes which are much bigger than her.

Since she is the only girl in the house she is given a little room all of her own. This could be considered a privilege, but in reality this causes her further suffering, the most terrible and the least known: fear, the fear of all that assails her when she is alone in the dark:

“I was always afraid to be alone at night and my daddy put, next to my bed, a little box with a niche of the Child Mary who, with her open eyes seemed to watch over me. How many things I used to tell her! I used to tell her everything because no one could understand me... and I felt lonely and very afraid. I still have this feeling of fear when I am alone in my room, and the sacrosanct will of God has wished that - apart from the two years of novitiate and the two years after my profession - because of my jobs I always remain alone in my room. I would do anything for the Lord, but how much fear I suffered!”

To have an idea of with what difficulty Bettina grew up, we will relate an episode which is almost incredible. While she is returning home from the river she sees the road blocked by an ox that, perhaps irritated by the red of her dress, hurls himself at her and with a butt throws her off the road, in the middle of a vineyard.

The owner finds the girl among the rows of grapevines and at first, thinking that she has gone to steal some grapes, approaches her to hit her; but the little girl tells him what has happened and the farmer, touched, gives her a bunch of grapes. Bettina returns home and, for fear that her mother will scold her again, doesn't say anything. She doesn't even tell her about the horrible laceration in her groin that was caused by the butt.

In silence she continues to do the housework and go to the river with the enormous loads of laundry, until the wound heals by itself, after several months. Years later, some doctors will remain astounded because they cannot understand how she survived a wound of that size, without treatment and even worse while continuing to work. However, things of this kind will often happen again in Mother Eugenia's life, and she will overcome them with extraordinary strength.

These are the mysteries of God. It is the school of suffering, silence, humiliation and sacrifice in which the Father raises his creature by preparing her for the terrible battles she will have to face and which she will overcome with heroic abnegation. Over the years, and with virtues, everything will be hidden behind an eternal smile.

Mother Felicita

The greatest bitterness is her mother's attitude, since she is always ready to scold her and punish her for nothing:

“Mother was a good woman, very devoted, and she suffered because of her poor health. In order to educate me well she was very strict, so much that whenever I wandered off to pick some flowers in the woods next to the garden and she used to call me out loud, I knew I was going to get two or three slappings. Instead of running away I used to run into her arms to receive them, this way I didn't worry about feeling the pain myself but I saw that my mother was more relieved”.

The illnesses which she suffered at the little girl's birth have left profound marks in her. Perhaps there is also an unconscious resentment towards the creature at whose birth she associates all the bitter personal and family events and, uniting this to the sense of helplessness which illness and poverty carry, such behaviour can be justified.

She is a strong woman, who is used to giving everything and who asks her little daughter for everything, probably without being able to understand the limits of her requests.

But we must look for the real motives in the mysterious action of the Spirit who educates his champions in the school of suffering right from a tender age. We can find similar situations in the life of other great souls, for example in don Dolindo Ruotolo (+ 1970) and Maria Valtorta (+ 1961), a few personalities who lived in our times.

However there is something about the relationship between Felicita and her little daughter which is overlooked in every enquiry. We can deduce it from other stories told by Mother Eugenia:

“One day a neighbour of ours, speaking to my mother, says: - At least you, Felicita, have this little girl who will help you and moisten your lips in the last moments of your life... My mother looks at me, gives me a smack and drives me away, then she replies to that woman: - No! All my children will be near me when I die, but Bettina won't be there!”

And that is what happened. When mother Felicita dies, in 1937, she has all her children around her bedside, except Bettina who is in Algeria. It is Holy Thursday, and Mother Eugenia is getting up to catch the steamship. Suddenly she hears the door open and in a flash she sees her mother as she had seen her the last time, when she had left to become a nun. A smile, a “bye Bettina” and mother Felicita vanishes from the window. On the steamship she receives a telegram which tells her about her mother's death, which took place exactly in the moment she had seen her in her room. Mother Eugenia concludes:

“It was Good Friday: Jesus dead, mommy dead! Whom should I weep? Jesus, I weep for you, do with my mother what your heart tells you to do”.

Grandfather's guidance

Bettina's mother instils fear in her, her brothers do not understand that this little girl needs someone to take care of her, to talk and play with her. Bettina, who possesses so much vivacity, feels condemned to solitude and silence.

Perhaps even this contributes to arousing in Bettina that terrible sense of fear, especially during the night, which will never leave her.

Her only comfort and refuge is her grandfather Piero, the only one who, at least partly, can understand her. He has an infinite tenderness for his

granddaughter and showers all the treasures of his spirit on her childlike soul.

Perhaps God allowed Bettina to remain isolated so that she wouldn't be corrupted by even the shadow of sin: grandfather Piero is the only one worthy of moulding her, and in fact he becomes her first spiritual director.

Bettina's grandfather's teachings and words will remain imprinted in her heart and mind; after seventy years she will remember them in all their freshness:

“Grandfather used to speak to me about faith: Jesus is in everyone and everywhere, try not to ruin the leaves or the flowers because God has created them; don't let anything waste or spoil, don't throw anything away, but use everything for the glory of God in his creation and providence. Use everything, let all your work yield and, above all, do it well because God's eyes are constantly watching over you...”.

Grandfather Piero sees and feels his granddaughter's suffering, but he cannot spare it from her; he can only help her to accept it and use it in a supernatural way:

“...pointing to the Adda river which can be seen flowing from my garden, grandfather said: Look, Bettina, the water you see flowing downwards today will not be seen tomorrow, it's not the same water. Therefore your crosses, tribulations, struggles and tears of today will pass and be sure not to keep them still, because tomorrow you will have other ones. Everything passes, accept the will of God day by day, do not ever become discouraged. Remain with God and God will remain with you. What more do you want?”.

One day Bettina, aware that her grandfather is working in the sun on the farm land, goes to draw cold water and brings it to him, certain that he will be grateful. But she is disappointed when her grandfather, after having smiled at her and thanked her, pretending to drink, brings the flask to his mouth but then lets the water fall on the ground. The little girl notices

and returns home sad, she feels offended and betrayed in her love. In the evening her grandfather looks at her and takes her aside smiling:

“Are you angry with your grandfather? Why?” “Yes, grandpa, I am angry because today I went so far to get some fresh water for you, and instead of drinking it you let it fall on the ground!” “You see, Bettina, I was so thirsty because I had been cutting the wheat since four o'clock in the morning without drinking a drop of water; but the souls in purgatory have been suffering for a longer time than me; and I gave them to drink”.

The souls in purgatory will be one of Mother Eugenia's deepest devotions, and there is no prayer that she will direct to the Lord without ending it with: *“...and save the souls in purgatory”.*

At school

The educational qualification you can get in San Gervasio is the third grade and all children are sent to school because it is needed in order to be able to work in a factory.

At the age of eight Bettina goes to school, and she must thus add her studies to her work at home. Up until the third grade she manages to succeed, but during this year the teacher thinks it is best to use her as a part-time maid by making her perform various tasks, among which doing her daily shopping.

Without being able to study at home because she had no time and without being able to follow the lessons at school, Bettina sees looming in the horizon the most galling humiliation of her childhood:

“In addition to the work I had to do at home, I had to work without being able to study at school. On the day of my examinations all my school-mates passed except me! What affliction! Yes, affliction, even because after the age of twelve you couldn't attend school anymore, and without a third grade certificate you could never find a job in any factory”.

She returns home crying and, even if her parents and brothers don't say anything to her, she can't hold back her tears. They try to console her by pointing out to her that there is already a lot of work for her to do at home and her mother cannot do it alone, but they obtain the opposite effect: they cannot understand that for Bettina not going to work in a factory means not being able to prepare her missionary trousseau in order to become a missionary when she is 20, just as she has decided. Still crying, she collapses on the stairs and slowly falls asleep:

“Around three o'clock in the afternoon, leaning against the wall, I fall asleep and in a dream I see Jesus who, drying away my tears, says: Don't cry anymore, my little girl, and don't ever call anyone teacher. I will be your Teacher now and always, I will teach you everything, and you will only know what I will teach you. If someone else wants to teach you something you won't understand it and you won't keep it in mind. Then, passing his holy hand across my face, as a caress, he continued: Remember that I am your only teacher. I woke up and I felt I was another person, all happy and content”.

And Jesus must have been an excellent teacher for her, if Bettina will manage to design hospitals and an entire city; if she will discover new medicines; if she will write pages of profound theology in Latin; if she will give long lectures in various languages, among which Arab.

And what about her third grade certificate? Bettina is not a type to give up in the face of a defeat: *“I studied by myself a little each day, in secret, during the summer. In October I showed up at the exam and I passed”.*

Worker

A month before her twelfth birthday Bettina is hired in the Crespi factory, one of the biggest textile manufacturers in Italy whose factory is located an hour from San Gervasio, in a town which will be called precisely Crespi.

There are nine working hours with alternate weekly shifts, the first from five in the morning to two in the afternoon, the other from two in the afternoon to eleven at night.

The work at the looms is exhausting, it is done standing up and it requires considerable attention as every thread that is out of place ruins the homogeneity of the fabric; for every error there is a fine and, if there are too many errors, you are fired.

In addition to the nine hours of work, Bettina has to add another two to go and come back from work; and for lunch she only has a bit of cold polenta without seasoning or bread.

Actually, her father, to whom she gives her salary in an envelope just as she receives it, gives her fifty cents each day to buy herself something to eat with the polenta; but this change, which she puts aside for months with so much perseverance, is used to purchase some pieces of fabric from the factory which Bettina then sews at night in order to prepare her trousseau.

Her missionary ideal is ever growing in her mind, but she knows that in order to go on a mission she must become a nun; to become a nun she needs a trousseau; in order to buy her trousseau she needs money she doesn't have. The only money she can use is the fifty cents she receives every day for food, which for eight years is regularly sacrificed for her missionary ideal. For years Bettina will only eat polenta, however she will reach the goal she has fixed for herself.

In order to sew her trousseau (which she keeps at a friend's house) she must work in secret after doing all the other chores which await her punctually when she comes home from work: clothes to wash and iron, house cleaning, clothes to mend. She manages to sleep for two or three hours at the most.

This continues until the age of twenty and in her is emerging ever more the strong woman, the indomitable fighter who will accomplish legendary feats for the Father's glory.

The Father's smile

Meditating on this description could create the image of a girl who was toughened by work and suffering, but this would be the most distorted and unreal image: Bettina is all smiles. She has learnt to live values which will be the basis of her spirituality:

"I must be the Father's smile"; "The useful tears are not the ones that fall down but the ones that go up" (that is, not the ones that are shed, but the ones that are offered).

Having grown taller, she remains very thin, but she has an inner luminosity which shines through on the outside and which conquers. More and more she acquires a noble spirit which is reflected in her posture, in her manner of speaking, acting and smiling. Even though she dresses very modestly she manages to give her clothes a touch of natural elegance which arouses jealousy in her friends. She has something that distinguishes her and that makes her stand out among the crowd. And many young men are disappointed when they learn that Bettina is going to become a nun. The first is Eugenio Crespi, the boss's son, whose love will remain faithful for this poor worker who - as in the most beautiful fairy tales - the King wants for himself: a week after the proclamation of the feast of Christ the King, on the last Sunday of October 1927, Elisabetta officially says goodbye to everyone.

During Sunday mass the pastor, giving the announcement of her departure for the novitiate, concludes saying: *"Christ the King has chosen his queen"*.

Postulant

Bettina enters the missionary institute of Our Lady of the Apostles in Lyons, France, founded by Father Planque in 1868, who has recently opened a house for novitiates in Bardello, Italy, in the province of Varese, in an old castle abandoned a long time ago.

Her new life begins amid disappointments and bitterness; Bettina is soon convinced that the crosses she left behind in San Gervasio have followed her to the convent, and are revised and greater in number. These consist in the difficulty she has in learning French; in a communal life not characterized by the charity which she expected; in the most absurd and unworthy reproaches; in the cold which makes her hands bleed and full of chilblains; in the vegetable soup - the only thing that she could never eat at home - which she now must eat at breakfast, lunch and dinner; lastly, in the mice, snakes and carrots. And at this point we must make a digression.

The new postulant is sent to sleep in the room which gives access to the old tower which, throughout the decades of abandonment, has become the dominion and pasture of all the mice of the old castle. During their nocturnal raids they find an extraneous body - a bed - along their traditional path, and they naturally climb over it in a continuous to and fro. Nobody has told them that Bettina is under the covers, scared stiff, and she doesn't say anything to the Superior for fear that she will have an unpleasant reaction.

When the night finally ends, and with it the terror of mice, a new day begins with the terror of snakes.

Bettina is given the task of removing the ivy which has covered all the walls and the ancient tree in the garden: she must take the climber from the base and pull until it comes off the wall and trunks. The job is rather simple and it would be child's play, if there weren't a lot of snakes nested between the ivy and the plants which - having suddenly woken up from their hibernation which has just begun - fall on Bettina along with the long shoots of ivy.

Their number is a mystery because they never end and they fall down at every tug. Perhaps the first ones, evicted, have nested on the trees that still have to be cleaned; the fact is that Bettina, having overcome the nightmare of mice, only has the time to prepare herself for the nightmare



of snakes during morning community prayer, which is reduced to a short prayer which she constantly repeats:

“Lord, do not let me be afraid of snakes today...”. But at times, and this is one of them, prayers don't have the desired effects.

Carrots are the basis of the novitiate's diet, where they are eaten at breakfast, lunch and dinner. Therefore all the available land is cultivated with carrots and, when it comes to cleaning them, Bettina is chosen: she is a postulant who is a bit retarded; she cannot learn a word of French and she cannot do demanding tasks such as embroidery and cooking, but perhaps she might be able to use a hoe.

Although this postulant has never touched a hoe, and is grateful for this attempt to make it up, she does her best not to disappoint their expectations.

They told her to remove the grass from the field; the grass is green; she removes everything green in the ground, including the leaves of the carrot plants which are thus condemned to a precocious and inglorious death.

This disaster creates such a vast stir that the parish priest of Bardello feels he is morally committed to send an SOS during Sunday mass, so that the population might help the poor nuns stricken by such a calamitous intervention in the carrot field.

One can imagine the rebukes and punishments given to the novice who is incapable even of hoeing a carrot field. What one can't imagine is what will happen the following year: when Bettina is given the punishment job of hoeing the devastated field: as soon as she starts hoeing, carrots of an incredible size appear, so big that they are joined to each other because of a lack of vital space.

Everyone rejoices, except Bettina who, in her misfortune, had been delighted at the thought of not having to eat carrot soup anymore three times a day.

Novice

Bettina's probationship ends quickly and it is time for her novitiate which, with the taking of the veil, also involves a change of name. The name, which is chosen by the Superiors, is communicated during the official ceremony.

“Your name will be Eugenia”. This is a shock for our postulant: in San Gervasio there is only one abnormal person, who is treated as the fool of the village and it is a woman whose name is precisely Eugenia. Bettina accepts this as well, without batting an eyelid.

On the other hand, she receives the applause, not very liturgical, of her former boss and admirer who went to attend the ceremony with a large representation from the factory. As if that weren't enough, he also shouts *“well done!”* which leaves the priest, nuns, relatives and those present speechless: few people know that his name is Eugenio and that the name chosen for the novice is the only thing that he will have in common with Bettina, even though he is no longer her boss but still a devoted admirer.

The profession

The two years of novitiate are about to end, however there is much hesitation in letting the novice Eugenia make her vows. She is considered too weak, too thin and always ill; perhaps not even very intelligent, given her inability to hoe the carrots and learn French.

There is talk about sending her back home and she isn't given permission to prepare her veil - the symbol of total consecration to God - like the other girls:

“What sorrow! My friends were preparing their veil and I wasn't; hidden tears, moaning, prayers ... I was waiting for the day and hour... and I hoped”.

If the nuns hesitate about admitting her to the profession it means that they haven't understood the miracle which Grace has performed in the spirit of their novice who, without even realizing it, has penetrated in the heart of the Trinitarian mystery. We can infer this from a story she herself tells with enchanting simplicity:

“When I was a young girl I found that the Our Father was too long and moreover, that Father who was always angry which I had in a picture above my bed scared me. Going to Heaven with that Father was scary! And poor Jesus, what a stern Father he had! Well, I will say the Hail Mary...

During the last months of my probationship I felt persecuted by the images of the Eternal Father which followed me everywhere, one more severe than the other... How many punishments I used to receive because we had to memorize the prayers in French but I just couldn't learn the “Notre Père”.

Close to my taking of the veil of 8 September 1928, by means of the holy rosary which I liked to recite but also meditate, the Most Holy Virgin made me understand that Catholic and especially religious life is not only a contemplation, but an entering into communication and participation with the Divine Family. But for me, a poor ignorant person, entering into the Divine Family seemed to me audacity and presumption.

No homily or reading had revealed this mystery of love to me yet. Struggles, doubts and fears that it was the devil. People often told me that the devil can turn himself into the figure of a Superior or God himself. I threw myself into the hands of Our Lady and she brought me into the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and at the school of this Heart I felt all his heartbeats, all his desires and all his flames. Boundless horizons, beautiful dawns, infinite love. How little I felt! Where was Jesus to lead me? To come to know the Father and his sweet love.

Jesus let me understand that we do not know the greatness, sweetness, paternity, patience, mercy, tenderness, providence, maternal attention and attentive kindness that the Father has for each one of us.

The Father gave us his only Son and Jesus came to make his Father known to us, to make us love him and give him glory. And he taught us how to go to the Father, by means of him who is the way. And the only prayer he taught us is the Our Father...”.

In addition to her love for the Father, a great need for unity arises in her. It is the Heart of Jesus which has given itself to her and has given her its own heartbeats:

“As a child I was already tormented by the thought of so many dissident, schismatics, etc. whose parents we had to pray for and I couldn't understand why they weren't united since they too were created to know, love and serve God like us.

Since, as a young worker, I could no longer participate in the spiritual reading done at home, I got into the habit of doing it on my own by reading the Gospel.

I was always attracted by the priestly prayer of Jesus, especially when, right after the institution of the Sacrament of Unity, he prays to the Father so that “we may be one”. But why does Jesus pray that we may be “one”? Are we therefore divided? These reflections caused me great suffering, but each time I opened the Gospel I was always forced to read that passage.

However, in the convent I see that even among us religious we had to be very careful to always keep quiet in order not to break up the harmony of the community. Before God I can say that with his help I never defended myself from the accusations which were made on my account, and neither have I accused anyone nor offended them of my own free will: I used to suffer, but I preferred to suffer in order to maintain unity and continue to love. Because only in love is there unity. Just as a member of the body which is out of place harms the entire body, so whoever lacks charity harms everyone and creates division...”.

On the eve of her profession, in the mind of this extraordinary novice, the two great tracks on which her spirituality (that is, the fullness of the spir-

it of the Gospel) will run are already clearly defined; UNITY in the FATHER.

After much hesitation she is allowed to take the veil *“for a year”*, precisely on 8 September. Sister Eugenia concludes: *“So the devil was disappointed”*.

Before there had been every kind of trial, *“external, internal and carnal diabolical temptations... the night before taking the veil there was a terrible snowstorm with thunder, lightning and wind”*.

Sister Eugenia asks Jesus to give her a sign so that she may understand that he truly wants her for himself; when she receives this sign, on the day of her profession she gives herself to God without reservation:

*“Jesus,
my master and my spouse forever,
I give myself to you totally and so intimately
that from now on you can do with me as you want.
If necessary, take my life and my will
What is most dear to me is my honour:
I give it to you also.
You are my Love, my Father, my King,
I will remain in Your house completely striving for You
in a continuous oblation with You
in every moment and every day united with You
in every Holy Mass
which today and during my life and after my death
will be celebrated until the end of the world
throughout the whole world”*.

At the mother house in Lyons

Eight days after her profession sister Eugenia is sent to the mother house in Lyons. Her job is to do the housework in the area of the convent where the Superior Generals live, light the various stoves in their rooms and give a hand in the wardrobe.

There she finds an atmosphere of profound division, with the Superior General in conflict with the Local Superior and with a whole web of party politics and nationalism which have divided the community into many small groups. As is her style, she takes refuge in constant silence by trying to love and serve everyone without siding with anyone, with the only result that she draws reprisal from all sides.

She receives the most frequent and groundless insults because she is Italian and therefore a foreign girl. These absurdities arouse in her soul profound disappointment, a sense of emptiness and bewilderment: she has left home, work and her homeland in order to enter into a bigger family, united in love and in the light of the spirit and she has found a world without love, injured by a thousand fractures of humanity.

She is seized with the doubt that she has gotten everything wrong, that she has failed all along the way.

“God is my Father”

With her soul saddened unto agony, she takes refuge in the Father, as Jesus did in Gethsemane, and during the community Mass she feels three invocations pour out from her heart:

*“Divine Father, sweet hope of our souls,
May you be known, honoured and loved by all men!”*

*“Divine Father, infinite goodness poured out on all peoples,
May you be known, honoured and loved by all men!”*

*“Divine Father, beneficial dew of humanity,
May you be known, honoured and loved by all men!”*

She now has new peace and a new strength. She finally understands why Jesus, in his prayer of Holy Thursday, asks the Father that they *“may be one”*: love, unity and peace spring from the Father's Heart and man will

never be able to accomplish these divine realities if he doesn't draw directly from this source.

That same evening sister Eugenia writes the marvellous prayer "God is my Father":

My Father in Heaven, how sweet it is to know that You are my Father and that I am your Child!

Especially when the skies of my soul are cloudy and my cross weighs more heavily, I feel the need to repeat to You: Father, I believe in Your love for me!

Yes, I believe that You are a Father to me at every moment of my life, and that I am Your child!

I believe that You love me with an infinite love!

I believe that You are watching over me night and day and that not a hair falls from my head without your permission!

I believe that, in Your infinite Wisdom, You know better than I what is good for me.

I believe that, in Your infinite power, You can bring good even out of evil.

I believe that, in Your infinite goodness, You make everything to the advantage of those who love You; even under the hands of those who strike me I kiss Your hand which heals!

I believe, but increase in me faith, hope and love!

Teach me always to see Your love as my guide in every event of my life.

Teach me to surrender myself to You like a baby in its mother's arms.

Father, You know everything. You see everything, you know me better than I know myself; You can do everything, and You love me!

My Father, since it is Your wish that we should always turn to You, I come with confidence to ask You, together with Jesus and Mary....

For this intention, and uniting myself to their Most Sacred Hearts,

I offer You all my prayers, my sacrifices and mortification's, all my actions, and greater faithfulness to my duties.

Give me the light, the grace and the power of the Holy Spirit!

Strengthen me in this Spirit, that I may never lose Him, never sadden Him and never allow Him to become weaker in me.

My Father, I ask this in the name of Jesus, Your Son! And You, Jesus, open Your Heart and place in it my own, and, together with Mary's, offer it to our divine Father! Obtain for me the grace that I need!

Divine Father, call all men to Yourself. Let all the world proclaim Your fatherly goodness and Your divine mercy!

Be a tender Father to me and protect me wherever I am, like the apple of Your eye. Make me always a worthy son/daughter; have mercy on me!

These prayers, approved in 1935 by Mons. Girard, Vicar Apostolic of Cairo and in 1936 by Cardinal Verdier, Archbishop of Paris, have been translated into dozens of languages and spread in every part of the world.

They have given many souls peace and a new trust in God, in many cases they have been confirmed by the Father's extraordinary intervention. This shouldn't arouse astonishment, since Jesus assured us that everything we ask in the Father's name we will obtain.

"The association of kindness"

In an atmosphere of red-hot nationalism - World War II is already in the air - which reigns in the mother house in Lyons, young sister Eugenia manages to form a small internal association made up of five sisters of different nationalities: "The association of kindness", in which the members commit themselves to accepting all the other sisters, to smile at everyone, without letting themselves be conditioned by the narrow-mindedness of language or homeland. The motto of the association is "Ad Patrem, per Jesum, In Spiritu Sancto, cum Maria" (To the Father through

Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, with Mary); the goal is to create and keep unity amongst themselves and with the others, at any cost. For the cause of unity they offer their lives to the Father.

The fury of hell

The “*father of discord*” cannot be pleased with what this little nun is spoiling for him in the world in which he reigns supreme. Only by appealing to this desperate fury of hell can we in part understand what the Superiors put sister Eugenia through during her first two years in Lyons, and which is incredible. Hell knows that it will be the end for him if these ideals of unity and love for the Father take root in other souls as well, and thus he tries his best.

In particular he uses the local Superior and it's hard to believe what she devises against sister Eugenia: she tries to prohibit her from getting coal so that she won't light the stoves for the Superior Generals, knowing that it would arouse their anger; she makes her sleep in an area of the house where there are mentally ill and senile sisters who keep her awake all night with their cries and odd behaviour, until she falls ill with a persistent cough and constant nose bleeds.

She then locks her up in the infirmary, however she is left all alone, without a mattress or covers or sheets and naturally without food; two days later she lets her out because the Mother General asks her for news about this nun who has disappeared, and so she apologizes by saying that she forgot that she had shut her up in there. After letting her leave the infirmary she puts her into the “*chalet*”, the ward of the tubercular sisters, because of her nose bleeds and obstinate cough. She has a temperature of 39° and she continues to cough, but unlike her ward mates she has an extraordinary appetite and she eats all the leftovers of the other nuns.

When the Mother General finds out about this - which is obviously considered a sure symptom of recovery - she reinstates her into the old duty

of sweeper-stoker-linen maid with in addition the task of preparing, in the free time she has during the morning, the parcels to be given to the nuns who leave on a mission.

The Local Superior, who is unaware of this new duty, scolds her publicly in the refectory because “*she wastes time hiding in order not to work*” and she drives her out without allowing her to eat, shouting at her: “*whoever doesn't work, doesn't eat!*”. Every day, at mealtime, she stands at the refectory door and sends her back punctually. Mother Eugenia says:

“I was hungry, so hungry, and when I passed by a dog on my way to throwing out the garbage I was so tempted to take the bones and soup he had left. Nevertheless I always worked and remained silent. When Sister Joan of Arc, my table companion, hadn't see me for several days, she hid her bread and gave it to me in secret; I kept it in my pocket and pulled out a little piece every once in awhile, and I put it in my mouth like a candy, in order to deceive my hunger”.

It is absurd, but in the spiritual world logic doesn't count for much. However, sister Eugenia doesn't tell us about the miracles that bloom around her, without her noticing them at all. She, in whom God lives and works, involuntarily creates a division. “*Either with me or against me*”, Jesus said, and this is also true for those who follow him closely.

It seems contradictory that both unity and division can be accomplished in God, but in reality true unity is only possible when there has been a fracture produced by the free choice of individuals. As with Jesus, also for sister Eugenia there is an almost total refusal by her fellow nuns:

“When they used to encounter me in the hallway they would say: There's the saint! They're going to put her on the altar with her eyes closed! They used to say this because I never raised my eyes in order not to see or know who was insulting me, so that I wouldn't have a reason to resent anyone; this way I can love everyone and I can smile at everyone. But how I suffered!”

This is God's style, always the same and new, which is repeated in his saints. For sister Eugenia this is the moment of passion, of refusal (it will be repeated many times throughout her life!), and she suffers it in silence, with the same serenity with which she will accept honours and glory.

The miraculous Host (The pastor Deloudes)

The confessor of the religious house refuses to hear the confessions of this strange nun because *"she doesn't tell her sins to him!"* She is therefore allowed to go to confession, with a permission which the Superior General gives her whenever and however she pleases, to the pastor of the town, Deloudes, the first priest who will in part understand her and stand up for her.

In the sacrament of confession the Holy Spirit must have made him realize that this penitent which others have refused to absolve is a special soul, and he begins to feel a respect for her which later becomes veneration.

Once when he is called to bring Communion to sister Eugenia who was ill, he breaks the Particle and gives her only half of it; the other half he puts in a reliquary and keeps it constantly exposed on the altar of Our Lady in his parish, with a lamp which is always lit, sustaining that that Host is miraculous.

The news spreads quickly, and many people go to the altar of Our Lady to ask Jesus in that half of a Host for graces: a series of miracles begins and will continue unceasingly as long as that Host is exposed, that is, as long as the pastor Deloudes lives.

However the Superiors don't agree with the pastor's opinion of sister Eugenia and they meet to decide once and for all the fate of this little nun from Italy who is ill, lazy and reluctant to talk even to her confessor. The unanimous verdict is that she must leave:

"One evening they give me a suitcase, take off my habit and veil, give me money for the trip and order me to leave with the ten o'clock train. Except that outside the convent door I run into the pastor, he greets me, asks me where I'm going and, surprised, calls the Superior General; they talk a bit amongst themselves, they call the Local Superior and after having talked at length they put on my habit and veil again and tell me to go to bed".

She resumes her work. The Superior General becomes more friendly, and the Local Superior doesn't speak anymore. Sister Eugenia *"works in silence and in intimacy with her God"*.

The dreadful trial has ended. Satan has lost another battle.

The light after the darkness

The Superior General's 12-year mandate expires and sister Ludovica is elected. A new way of reasoning begins, because this nun is one of the few that has sensed sister Eugenia's greatness of spirit and, as soon as she is elected, she confides in her and asks for her help:

"I helped her accept her position with resignation by speaking to her for the first time about the Father. I told her to accept His will because all authority comes from God and all we have to do is make ourselves his true little children, trusting and secure in his loving Fatherly hands".

Mother Ludovica, a woman of great faith and humility, in tears asks her last subject for suggestions, and asks her to stay close to her and she promises to let herself be guided by this doctrine of true *"daughter in the Son"* for the glory of the Father, until death. And so it will be.

The horrible sufferings with which hell tried to destroy young sister Eugenia and separate her from her institute bring about the opposite effect: she is more and more strengthened in the ideal of unity for the glory of the Father and, what is more important, she begins to convey this ideal to her fellow sisters.

It is little sister Eugenia's first great victory.

The "Message" of Our Father

In 1932 sister Eugenia receives the "Message" which consecrates her definitively and officially as the "prophet" of the Father, she who prepares the way for him so that he may bring his kingdom of mercy on earth.

This is the prevailing statement of the "Message" and therefore of Mother Eugenia's mission: to prepare children to accept in their hearts the Father who, in them and with them, intends to accomplish his kingdom of love.

Many people await the return of Jesus "with destructive power" and they think his coming will coincide with the "end of the world". Actually, the Father returns in the Son with all his omnipotence of creative love which will make everything new; which will eliminate the evil of the world forever; which will finally unite all men into one big family in which all will acknowledge themselves as brothers in their love for a common Father.

It is time that men convince themselves that God is their Father, a Father of infinite mercy and tenderness who wants to come amongst them in order to free them from sin. These are the times: the encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* by Pope John Paul II has officially inaugurated the era of the Father, of which Mother Eugenia was a non heeded prophet for fifty years.

We received the "Message" in a providential way and, certain that it will give many souls a ray of light and hope, we have translated it into twenty languages and spread it all over the world. Those who desire a copy may request it. We here publish the first few pages:

1 July 1932 FEAST OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

Here, finally, is the day, blessed forever, the day the celestial Father promised!

Today the long days of preparation are over, and I feel close, so close to the coming of my Father and the Father of all men.

A few minutes of prayer, and then what spiritual joys! I was overwhelmed by the desire to see Him and hear Him!

My heart, burning with love, opened up with such great confidence that I realized that, until then, I had never been so trusting with anyone.

The thought of my Father made me, as it were, madly happy.

Finally I began to hear singing. Angels came to announce this glad arrival!! Their songs were so beautiful that I decided to note them down as soon as possible.

This harmony ceased and then came a procession of the elect, the cherubim and seraphim, with God, our Creator and our Father. Prostrate, with my face to the ground, sunk in my own nothingness, I said the Magnificat. Immediately afterwards, the Father told me to sit close to Him and write what He had decided to say to men.

The entire, heavenly court who had accompanied Him vanished. Only the Father remained with me and, before sitting, He said:

"I have already told you and now I say it again: I cannot give my beloved Son another time to prove My love for men! I am now coming among them in order to love them and to make them know this love, assuming their image, their poverty.

Look, now I am putting aside My crown and all my Glory to take on the appearance of an ordinary man!"

Having assumed the appearance of an ordinary man by placing his crown and His glory at His Feet, He took the globe of the world and held it to His Heart, supporting it with His left Hand. He then sat next to me.

I can say but a few words about His arrival and about the appearance he deigned to assume, and about His love! In my ignorance I do not have words to express what He revealed to me.

"Peace and salvation" He said, "to this house and to the whole world! May My power, My love and My Holy Spirit touch men's hearts, so that all mankind may turn to salvation and come to its Father, Who seeks it, to love and to save it!

Let My Vicar Pius XI understand that these are days of salvation and blessing. Let him not fail to take this opportunity to call the attention of the children to their Father, Who is coming to help them in this life and to prepare their everlasting happiness.

I have chosen this day to begin My work among men because today is the feast of the Precious Blood of My Son Jesus. I intend to bathe in this Blood the work I am beginning, so that it may bear great fruit among all mankind".

1933: Holy Year of the Redemption

At this point the "Message" has been conveyed and handed over to the Church, in the person of the Bishop; the glory of the Father has begun to shine and sister Eugenia is called to undergo a further trial from which will come forth a power of light so strong that it will subdue everyone. The Holy Year of 1933 is about to begin:

"A few weeks later (from Mother Ludovica's election) I fall ill and I am in bed with a fever during the entire year of 1933. All by myself with my God and with the Divine Family. That year went by in dreadful physical suffering. But how many beatitudes! I don't know whether it was with my body or without my body, but it was a complete intimacy with my God. My nourishment was 12 grams of sugar and water a day, for the entire year, and I weighed 27 kg".

Indeed, to go on for a year with only twelve grams of water and sugar a day is a bit strange: practically sister Eugenia lives on the Eucharist alone.

There is great turmoil among the other nuns and those who take spiritual care of the institute, including the Bishop. After much consultation, in order to be certain that this is completely the work of God without human deception - you can expect everything from this strange little nun from Italy - they devise a way to make sure she doesn't get up and go to eat in secret: all around her and above the bed they draw a net of very thin threads so, if she gets up, she must necessarily break one of them.

The threads remain taut for 365 days.

Counsellor General and teacher of the novices

At Easter 1934 sister Eugenia recovers completely and resumes her job as "sweeper". However, after the year that was a continuous miracle, the atmosphere that surrounds her is remarkably different. There is no wonder that, in June of that same year, she is elected Counsellor General and, in October, teacher of the novices.

The latter appointment takes place in a completely original manner. While she is doing her "sweeping" job, the Mother General calls her and brings her upstairs, to the last floor, where the novices are. She opens the door of the lecture room and, to the 120 novices who are waiting, she introduces her saying: "*Here is your new teacher. She will now give you a lecture*". Afterwards she goes out and closes the door behind her.

The new teacher sits at her desk and, although she has never learned French well, speaks for three and a half hours on "*The Eucharist, a sign of unity*". A few nuns take notes in a notebook and that lecture will be the topic of study and amazement for many people and for a long time. The light begins to shine.

For sister Eugenia it would seem that the moment of truth and peace has arrived, but in reality it is only a breath of fresh air that the Father grants her before launching her in other battles, each one more difficult than the other.

The Diocesan enquiry

The story of this young nun has now crossed the walls of cloistered life. The Holy Year which she spent in bed in that extraordinary situation, the continuous reoccurrence of extraordinary facts connected to her and the non-human culture which she proves to have, led the ecclesiastic authorities to start an enquiry in order to throw light on the situation.

In 1935 His Excellency Alexandre Caillot, Bishop of Grenoble, institutes a commission of “experts” drawn from various parts of France to conduct a diocesan enquiry which will last several years. Its members include the Bishop of Grenoble's Vicar General, Mons. Guerry, theologian; the Jesuit brothers, Father Alberto and Father Augusto Valencin, and two doctors of medicine, one of whom is a psychiatrist.

Endless interrogations, intimidations, reproaches, threats and accusations are repeated at every encounter. The enquirers would even be willing to accept the mystical ascensions of this nun, but never will they justify her absurd demand of making the Father known and loved. They bombard her with questions, and when she realizes she cannot obtain anything with words, she remains silent. This silence provokes the anger of the “experts” and is interpreted as guilt and pride:

“I was very small: they could have crushed me, but I was united to He who was (and is) in me and I in Him. Here are some statements made to me: “With this Glory of the Father you are making us priests lose the faith”; “Who will believe in the Father that you wish to make known? Terrible punishments await you”; “You are making people lose their faith, you are making France lose its faith, you are Italian and you have

come to France to let France lose its primogeniture!”; “You torment people's souls, you are a heretic”.

I always remained silent. How could I respond - me, a poor ignorant person - to these theologians and philosophers? I read the Holy Gospel and I understood that Jesus came for the Glory of the Father; that Jesus loves the Father and that if we love Jesus we must love whom He loves. And I was surprised that they didn't know that Jesus can make the Father known to whoever He wants. I never found the moment to express these thoughts to them since they were always the ones talking and I felt like a poor child before these learned men”.

Since the “experts” can't make her retract everything, entrenched as she is in her silence, they send her to a mental hospital.

In the mental hospital

Like a new Isaac, sister Eugenia is led to torture by Mother Ludovica, the new Abraham, the only Superior who was truly a mother to her:

“At the end of December of the same year (1934), I had just begun a lecture for the novices, and the Mother General comes towards me and orders me to leave everything and follow her. We walk along Rue de Vienne, I see that she is crying and I ask her: - Mother, where are we going?; but she sobs, dries her tears and stops in front of the door of a clinic run by the sisters of St. Vincent. She rings the bell and we go to a big room before two Jesuit fathers - the Valencin brothers - Mons. Guerry and the two lay doctors, that is the Commission desired by Mons. Caillot. They tell me to sit down and then they start questioning me: -Is it true that you want to make the Father known? That Jesus and Our Lady speak to you? How do you speak to God? Does the Father have a beard? What do you feel when you talk to God? I answered as I could, but how can language describe what God is like? I answered yes for whatever was true, but they wouldn't believe even if

they made me swear. I never saw beards, but shining and radiant people in a sea of light, I don't know how I was able to sense it. When I speak to God in my heart I don't know if it is with my own physical eyes and body, but they, who are learned, must have known it. Moreover I was a poor ignorant girl; I have never studied Italian or French, perhaps I wasn't able to express myself well and they got angry. Since they continued to question me about things I had never said or written and it seemed to me that they were inventing things, I didn't answer anymore. They became even more furious because I wouldn't answer, but I remained the whole time seated without moving, with my eyes lowered, conversing with God; I preferred to remain with my Everything rather than with them who continued to yell and threaten me.

After four hours of questioning they concluded: - This is a woman's mental hospital, and you will stay here until you tell the truth. Your habit and veil will be taken away from you, you will no longer receive Communion nor will you meditate or do the Stations of the Cross, you will only be able to listen to Holy Mass. Then we will send you back to Italy where you will be sent to jail for the evil you have done to the Church in France with your inventions about the Father.

Then they left, but Father Albert Valencin turned back and said to me: - Take courage. I fell on my knees and asked him for his blessing. Then I burst into tears and he left.

A sister of St. Vincent brought me to the room where these dear patients were, and I was frightened when I heard them speak and saw how they behaved: things unheard of and which I had never seen filled those two days and two nights I was there, until Christmas Eve. One of these patients didn't want me to stand to her right, the other to her left; all I heard night and day were howls and cries. I am not able to eat, and the next day the sister tells me: - If you don't eat I will put you to work in the showers.

On Christmas Eve, while I'm waiting for my lay dress (which with atrocious suffering I had prepared myself to wear again for the love of my

God), I see a sister who calls me and says: - Your Superior is waiting for you in the chapel. - At this point the sacrifice of all and everyone is done. I will go to the Superior; I will give her my religious habit and it will be over with. I kiss my veil and my crucifix for the last time and I go to the chapel. I adore Jesus, then I approach the Superior General and I see her shocked, immersed in tears, as white as marble.

- Mother! I say to her. She looks at me and says: - Daughter! And we both burst into tears. Then she adds: - Come home. - Home? I answer, no, no, I don't want to disobey, I have to go to jail in Italy. She answers me: - No, never. For the glory of the Father and so that you will always stay with us, I will give my life, but come home. I'll take care of Mons. Guerry. Even the pastor of Moulin is suffering immensely because of your suffering and he has ordered me to come get you”.

In silence, not having anything else to say, so great was the pain on both sides, we leave. On foot, because by trolley people would have looked at us with astonishment, seeing us so wounded and sorrowful.

Neither could the Mother General say a word about her struggles and sufferings, and neither could I about mine. So many things went by us! However, there was too much suffering and talking about it would have reduced the mysterious beauty of the faith, obedience and sweet and immense suffering for so great a glory of the Father. When we arrived, it didn't seem true that I was home again. The Mother gave me the key to my room-office and without saying a word she went back into her room. As soon as I went in, I kissed the walls of my institute, of the convent I loved and which I thought I had lost.

It was Christmas Eve: I prepared to go to the novices with a smile. It was difficult...”.

On 27 December sister Eugenia is ordered to leave the novitiate and go to another house as a canonical punishment. She doesn't know what this means, but she obeys.

The first victim

When she returns, Mother Ludovica tells her that from the day she was went through that long interrogation and was closed up in a mental hospital, she has always been ill. She offered her life for the glory of the Father and for her, sister Eugenia, and she now feels that her offering has been accepted: *“However I will die saying that the glory of the Father is true, and for both I will be happy to die. My death will be the greatest witness of her mission”*. Then, addressing a group of sisters who are present, she continues in a loud voice: *“I will leave, but the day you don't respect and don't have faith in sister Eugenia, the Lord will snatch her away from us and our institute will decay if not finish altogether”*.

A month later, on 9 February 1935, sister Ludovica dies among sister Eugenia's arms saying: *“I believe in the glory of the Father”*. She is 44 years old and was Superior General for only three years. She leaves sister Eugenia as Counsellor General and teacher of the many novices. Thus sister Eugenia has to take over the whole institute, together with the novitiate, since the secretary is ill and the assistants are very old. She must also prepare the general chapter for the election of a new Superior on her own, and she does all this with the atrocious sorrow of having seen the death of the first creature that the Father chose for his glory.

The Church is founded on the martyrs. If the seed doesn't die, it doesn't bear fruit. Just as St. Francis, who on seeing the bodies of his first brother martyrs return to Italy, exulted with joy and said: *“Now I really have friar minors!”*, so sister Eugenia can offer to the Father for his glory and for unity these first fruits, as the foundation of the new humanity that will be totally united, in an act of total donation, in the heart of the Father.

The glory of the Father spreads

A strange and unexpected thing happens to the Commission that is judging sister Eugenia. While she is prohibited even from mentioning the

Father, the enquirers absorb and convey this splendid spirituality: Mons. Guerry writes *“Ver le Père”* (Towards the Father) which is soon translated into sixteen languages; P. Augusto Valencin writes *“La joie dans le Père”* (Joy in the Father) and he forms disciples at the filial school of the Father. One of his university students, François, dies while raising a beautiful song to the Father: *“Père, dont le Nom est Tendresse”* (Father, whose Name is Tenderness).

The diocesan enquiry ends

After several years, the Commission returns to H.E. Mons. Caillot the voluminous file with the results of the enquiry. Of course we were not able to go through all the documents; but if one day a process of beatification of Mother Eugenia is begun, we can be certain that the *“devil's advocate”* will find most of the work already done excellently by many of his colleagues. He only has to have the archives in the Curia of Grenoble opened and he will find the canonical enquiry already set in motion.

We were able to obtain a copy of the testimony of H.E. Mons. Alexandre Caillot, Bishop of Grenoble, which we have published together with the Message. Here are the conclusions:

Following the dictates of my soul and my conscience and with the keenest sense of my responsibility to the Church, I declare that supernatural and divine intervention seems to me the only logical and satisfactory explanation of the facts.

Isolated from all the surrounding features of the case, these essential facts seem to me to be noble, lofty and supernaturally rich: that a humble nun has called souls to true devotion to the Father, such as Jesus taught and the Church has enshrined in its liturgy. There is nothing alarming in this, only something that is very simple and in accordance with solid doctrine.

The miraculous facts which accompany this message could be separated from the main event and its value would still be preserved in its entirety. For doctrinal reasons, the Church will declare whether the idea of a special feast can be considered separately from this particular case involving the sister.

I believe that the fundamental proof of the authenticity of the nun's mission is shown by the way in which she puts into practice in her life the beautiful doctrine which she was apparently destined to remind us of.

I deem it proper to let her continue her work. I believe that the hand of God is in all this. After ten years of research, reflection and prayer, I bless the Father for having deigned to choose my diocese as the place for such touching manifestations of His love”.

Mother General: 7 August, feast of the Father

Sister Eugenia convenes the chapter for the month of August, and on the 7th she is unanimously elected Superior General.

It is the triumph of the Father, whose feast in the Message is requested precisely for the 7th of this month. For three years, according to the will of the previous Mother General, in the novitiate and in many houses of the institute the Father is celebrated on this day; even lay people have formed groups of “*Children of the Father*” which celebrate His feast on 7 August.

Why 7 August? Because it is the day immediately following the Transfiguration, during which the Father makes his voice heard in giving testimony of his Son in the great theophany of Mount Tabor: “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him*” (Mt 17,5). Mother Ludovica wanted each house of the institute to have a large image of the Father put at the place of honour and she included various prayers to the Father among the daily devotions.

The Bishop of Grenoble, who had instituted a congregation of nuns which he intended to call of the “*Catholic Motherhood*”, before going to Rome to ask the Holy Father for his official approval, commends himself to Mother Eugenia's prayers and promises to call them “*Daughters of the Father*” if he obtains the Pope's approval. This matter ends successfully and the Bishop keeps his promise.

This time it seems as if Mother Eugenia finally made it: the diocesan enquiry was a triumph, now she is Mother General and all the religious and civil authorities hold her in the palm of their hand. In particular, it seems that the devotion to the Father is gaining popularity.

However, let us not be deceived, even this time this break will not last long, just enough time to let her take a breath of air. The little prophet of the Father has still a lot to do to prepare the way for Him, and this way cannot be scattered with daisies.

Her writings

Mother Eugenia is finally free to act, even if for a short time, and she can begin to convey the spark of the fire that is consuming her. In a very short time she writes “*The Father's dew*”, a meditation for every day of the year: a new “*Directory*” for the Institute; a series of lectures for the first year of the novitiate and another one for the second year; an eight-day “*Spiritual Retreat*” in preparation for the shift from novice to sister; an eight-day “*Retreat*” for the Superiors; a thirty-day “*Retreat*” for nuns who return from a mission; the “*Marian Month*”, the “*Devotions to the Sacred Heart*” and the “*Devotions to the souls in Purgatory*”: all this is marked by a spirituality of the Father.

She also finishes the work which she cares about most: “*How the Father comes to us*”: in the divine Father is all authority and paternity which He conveys to all fathers and mothers on earth so that they can responsibly build up and govern the family. The family is at the centre of divine atten-

tion, the concrete sign of unity on earth. May unity pour out with splendour from the ineffable and sweet fatherhood of God: the unity of heaven and earth, the unity of all men in the mystical body of Jesus. Jesus is the Frère aîné, that is the first-born, and we are all brothers in Him. He makes us share in the Divine Family. In the Holy Mass Jesus unites us and talks and offers himself to the Father for us; in him we, his brothers scattered all over the world, talk and offer ourselves to the Father. In him all humanity, united with the angels and saints, finds it easy to pray, converse and thus become a living member of the Divine Family.

Mother Eugenia's spirituality is summarized in "How the Father comes to us". As all her other writings, it was officially destroyed following the various sanctions imposed by Church Authorities, but we are convinced that a few copies are safe in the above-mentioned archives: perhaps one day everything will come to light, but it is sad to observe how the talents God gives us to be shared are once again made infertile and hidden underground.

Or inside an archive, which is the same thing.

Propaganda Fide

Given this new organization of the Institute, by directing everything towards the Father, the new General goes to Rome to introduce herself to the Cardinal Protector, His Excellency Fumasoni Biondi, Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, to pay homage to him and to inform him of everything she has done and intends to do.

She is immediately followed by Mons. Guerry, the Vicar of the Bishop of Grenoble, who came to bring the Cardinal the files of the "*Glory of the Father*" with the results of the Commission's enquiries.

The Cardinal advises him to beware of "*that little nun*", because the Mother General is too young and inexperienced to understand her and follow her... Mons. Guerry is left speechless, and later on he will con-

fess: "*I have never felt so embarrassed, but in the end I had to tell him that the little nun was precisely the Mother General who had gone to see him in the morning...*".

Later on Fumasoni Biondi will have a very clear talk with "*that little nun*": he forbids her to talk about the Father and celebrate him in a special way on 7 August; she must remove all the images of the Father which the previous Superior had placed in all the houses of the Institute.

What bitter irony! Mother Eugenia herself, the first apostle of the Father, the prophet of this immense spirituality, must now, house by house, eliminate the signs which were sealed by Mother Ludovica's holocaust! As always, she will obey. But more than ever at a high price.

Nevertheless, a sincere respect and affection binds Card. Fumasoni Biondi to Mother Eugenia. Each time she goes to visit him he invites her to have lunch with him.

He himself will tell her about a cloistered nun from the north of Italy who has also written a "*Month of the Father*" and who also claims that the feast of the Father is on 7 August. He also tells her the name of Mons. Guerry's book which was published in Italy and which he meditates on every day, but he always concludes: "*... it is better for the Jesuits, Dominicans and Franciscans to introduce the Church to this new devotion which will hardly be accepted if it is introduced by a nun. Moreover, why do we need this new devotion?*".

With a candour which is typical of her, Mother Eugenia just points out to him that in the end it isn't such a new devotion, since Jesus introduced it two thousand years ago...

The determination of an eagle

Man will be known by his works, says the Gospel. It's easy to tell what this little nun, until a short time ago considered barely good at cleaning

the hallways, is made of: everything is a whirl of initiatives and provisions which in a few months' time radically transform the face of the Institute and especially of the nuns which constitute it.

She renews every community with a series of transfers which break up the narrow-minded party politics and nationalism which were created in several years of ultra-conservatism and she creates a completely new approach to the nuns' formation. She begins with the novitiate of the mother house of Lyons, where the probationers of various parts of the world meet, introducing shorthand typing, home economics and typography courses. In the two years of her novitiate, every girl obtains one or more specializations which will enable her to make herself useful to the utmost in mission territory.

The great pond, which up until then resounded only with croaking gossip, is now a beehive in which everyone is thoroughly engaged and there is not even time to waste in small talk. The spiritual life benefits from it in spontaneity and intensity and nothing is taken away from prayer time. The spirituality of the new Mother General - unity in the Father - eliminates the nationalistic barriers of the various groups and a lively joy animates these creatures who with disappointment saw their initial outbursts fade into weary and narrow horizons.

There is a new enthusiasm, a true brotherhood, a more and more widespread smile on everyone's face. Cardinal Gerlier, from Lyons, while visiting the house will say: *"I wish we were all like these little nuns, happy, joyous and united: we should bring our seminarians here"*.

At the time of Mother Eugenia's election, there were only a dozen of sisters with a teacher's diploma in the Institute of Our Lady of the Apostles and only one nurse. Since missionary activity is carried out essentially in scholastic and medical fields, the new Mother General engages all the nuns who are able to do so in nursing, teaching and university studies. Within a few years she can rely on dozens of professional nurses, teachers and medicine, literary and scientific graduates.

With this highly qualified staff - let us not forget that we are in 1935, when even in the lay world there were very few women graduates in medicine - Mother Eugenia can organize the Institute using broad criteria, setting the various houses scattered throughout the world in an arrangement similar to that of the Roman Empire. First of all, in every house she places two sisters with a nursing and teaching degree for the clinics and schools; then she unites several houses in the province lead by two graduate sisters with whom the teachers and nurses resolve the various scholastic and medical problems on the spot. With several provinces she forms the regions supervised by two other graduate nuns who act as intermediaries to the other two graduate nuns who are permanent at the mother house and are in charge of the two fields. Each month the provincial representatives meet with the regional ones and the latter with the general, in order to review the situation of the various houses. Each month the general representatives tell Mother Eugenia about the scholastic and medical difficulties of the entire Institute, and she is always informed and updated on the situation of every house and sister and she can intervene promptly to solve any problem there may be.

Every three years the sisters in charge of the two fields have meetings in Paris, Lyons, London or Rome to exchange ideas and experiences and to keep up-to-date professionally.

With a revolutionary decision for her times, Mother Eugenia opens several novitiates in the vital spots of Africa and Europe: Dahomey, Ivory Coast, English Nigeria, Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria, Holland and England. In this way she breaks up the situation of colonialism which the religious organization of her institute is imbued with, and she establishes a new type of formation which is more respectful for the human person and his social context. She is a prophet in this aspect as well: today the missionary Church is directed towards the formation of the indigenous clergy on the spot.

Mother Eugenia will have the joy of seeing the first fruits of the Church in Africa: in Dahomey, in a family of fourteen children, there is the blos-

soming of the vocation of sister Gesuina, the first indigenous nun, and her brother, a Jesuit priest.

The sisters, at first disoriented because they are engaged in activities which they aren't prepared for, now carry out their mission with a zeal which nothing and no one can stop. The Institute, under the generalship of Mother Eugenia, reaches six thousand members, becoming one of the strongest missionary forces in the Church.

The mother eagle has taken in her claws the daughters entrusted to her, she has freed them from the coop in which they were closed up and now she makes them rise, higher and higher, to where the eagles reign, in order to launch them from God's heavens to all corners of the earth. Even materially: when there are no more bicycles, her doctor-nuns will go around Africa by plane.

On her missions

After reorganizing the Institute in Europe using these new criteria, Mother Eugenia begins to visit the houses of her missions, which she will continue uninterruptedly throughout the twelve years of her generalship. There are many obstacles, but she overcomes them all with the determination she already demonstrated in France and with surprising simplicity. She is truly a child who lets herself be guided by the Father and who dares to do everything, can do everything and obtains everything for his glory.

She encounters her first difficulties in the Fathers of the African Missions who are connected to her Congregation because they too were founded by Father Planque, who don't accept the fact that an Italian is the head of the Institute of Our Lady of the Apostles, which is French. Moreover these Fathers, who govern the nuns who go on the missions, emphasize their authority too much and the nuns are conditioned and troubled by their paternalism. They also feel powerful because they administrate the

money which Propaganda Fide gives to pay for their trips, for the clinics and for schools. They still haven't understood what this new young, yet feeble-looking, Mother General is made of and they don't expect her response which is worthy of a queen: "*We have come to the mission to help the Church, and not to receive your support*". And, as is her style, she works tout-court by refusing any economic contribution, she purchases vast pieces of land near those of the missionaries and builds a nursery school, a school, a clinic and a home for the sisters, who suddenly obtain autonomy and total freedom.

When Mother Eugenia tells Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi about her decisions, he objects: "*How will the nuns live without the contributions of Propaganda Fide?*". "*They will have enough money for themselves, responds the Mother, and even to help other missions*". And that is what happens.

Of course the Fathers of the mission don't accept this new framework without demonstrating their opposition because it upsets their conciliating routine, and they appeal to the Vicar Apostolics of North Africa. The latter, just for a change, prepare an enquiry against Mother Eugenia in which she is charged with the most diverse accusations. As is her style, realizing that her arguments are not being listened to, she keeps silent, which exasperates the accusers even more.

Mother Eugenia will speak with her works and she will be spoken for by the nuns who are finally free and by the indigenous peoples who will welcome her everywhere like a queen. A few years later, after seeing her fruits, even the Vicar Apostolics will speak: "*Mother, in every procession, first there is the cross and then the flag*".

Setbacks along the way: termites...

We can understand how Mother Eugenia was able to overcome so many difficulties only by going back to the incredible strength which the Father gave her to cope with suffering.

During her canonical visit to one of the houses in Africa she is welcomed by the people and by the authorities of the village with flowers and welcoming speeches which, according to African culture, go on for a long time. No one can imagine that the Mother General has stopped right on top of a termites' nest whose inhabitants attack her, increase in number, and begin to devour her.

Once the greetings have ended, the Mother responds with a few words and hurries into the house. As soon as the nuns realize what has happened, they fill up a big tub of water and they immerse her up to her head, which is already invaded by the voracious little animals who give up their "fierce meal" only to avoid drowning.

The operation is repeated three times, changing the water every time, and a new layer of termites always forms on the surface: "Hell, I experienced hell..., Mother Eugenia told me, it wasn't Purgatory, I know that... it was really hell... and the people's speeches never came to an end... for more than an hour...".

Only God knows how she was able to resist for more than an hour, devoured by termites; He has tempered this woman with a superhuman strength, as other episodes also confirm.

... a piece of jaw

A terrible toothache stopped Mother Eugenia in Egypt during her continuous missionary pilgrimage. She is brought to the dentist, who immediately decides to pull out the bad molar, naturally without anaesthesia: he grabs the pliers, and with a single blow extracts a piece of the bone on which lie two teeth, with their roots; it's a good thing that one of the two teeth is the bad one.

"And what did you do then?" "I continued the visit according to my plans, although I had some difficulties eating and speaking..."

In confirmation of the fact, Mother Eugenia, smiling, points her index finger to the cavity in her cheek which I had already noticed, however I wouldn't ever have imagined its cause.



The mother of lepers

Leprosy is the most dreadful disease which has ever devastated man. Those affected by it see pieces of their body fall off, one by one, starting from their hands and feet, and everything becomes a horrible wound. Biblically speaking it was presented as the most realistic image of sin and we often find passages of the Gospel which speak of lepers whom Jesus heals. Back then as now, people stricken by this disease were banned from society and forced to die slowly at the edge of civilization.

Until a few years ago, it was incurable. If today it has practically been eradicated, it is because one day Mother Eugenia, during her journeys in Africa, meets some lepers buried alive up to their necks; she is devastated and decides to help them by taking care of them and gathering them in a city-hospital built especially for them. However, in order to treat them she needs a medicine which doesn't exist, and so she decides to extract it from the seed of a tropical plant - the chalmogras - making an ointment from it which is capable of stopping the development of the disease. The Pasteur Institute in Paris then developed her discovery, thus enabling official science to eradicate it completely.

I asked Mother Eugenia why she chose “that” seed of a plant and not another, and I received the scientific response that, if that plant existed, it surely had to be used for something. She also told me how she used to prepare her medicine: by crushing the seeds and putting the mixture on the wounds. However, let us listen to her narration of this shining page of her life, which she does with a disarming simplicity, almost speaking in the third person:

“I was in Africa when the war broke out. I was visiting the Ivory Coast in order to reach Dabou and Memni and I found myself in a forest where I saw lepers buried up to their necks. Some shouted, others moaned, exhausted by hunger and fever. By digging with my hands I pulled out from the ground those who were still alive, and I enquired where they could be picked up and brought to. In the village I was told that there was Desirée island where the new lepers were gathered.

I visited them and found them abandoned on the island. They lived in houses made of sheets of metal which became red-hot from the sun; they themselves had built them using empty petroleum tanks, which they found abandoned there. They had no medicine. A leper girl named Joan of Arc took care of them, with her hands which were missing a few fingers. The doctor used to come once a month but he never entered the village for fear of contamination. He gave the girl a few bottles of medicine which she then diluted with water so that it would be enough for everyone.

I went to Abidjan and asked the Governor for 200 hectares of land. I then designed a leper colony that would be an autonomous city, with a house for every leper, schools, hospital, cinema and church. The plan was star-shaped, with all common services in the middle.

In order to find the money needed to build the city I convinced Monsieur de Follereau, who had sought refuge in our house in Lyons to escape being captured by the Nazis, to embrace the lepers' cause. I assured him that no one would stop him. Besides contributing with his means, he began to propagate the lepers' conditions with lectures and writings, and collect money for the work which was being undertaken.

Within three years the city of Adzopé was already broadly accomplished, with 15 km of roads including the bridges over the rivers which had been taken from the forest metre by metre.

All the lepers of Desirée Island were brought to Adzopé where each one received his own house made in cement, brought there especially from France. These dear brothers, suffering members of Christ, more needy than anyone else, received their own house, and from that moment they were taken care of by two of our sisters, graduates in medicine and surgery and specialized in obstetrics”.

To better understand the story of Adzopé and Mother Eugenia we publish T. Bosio's interview with Raoul Follereau, which was published in “Primavera”, a bi-monthly addressed especially to young people:

“Hitler, the Nazi dictator of Germany, launched against France the most powerful army in history. The armed tanks with swastikas broke through the frontiers and headed for Paris. Follereau, a Catholic who was never afraid of his convictions, had written a series of articles entitled: Hitler, the Antichrist. As soon as they entered Paris, the Nazis began to look for him.

With his soldier uniform still on (he had been recalled into the French army, but during the sudden war he didn't even have the time to fire a shot), Raoul knocked on the door of the convent of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles, on the outskirts of Lyons. A few days after a strange gardener began to wander among the vast farm of the convent; he didn't know how to use a hoe and he made very crooked furrows.

In that same period, in 1939, while the Germans enter Paris, a seaplane lands on the lagoon of Abidjam, on Desirée island, along the Ivory Coast. It is a fantastic island, with big swaying palm trees, a pearl sea and fiery sunsets, yet it is hell for the living. When occasional pirogues approach, the shore becomes crowded with strange figures, almost like statues which have been horribly corroded with time. The rowers throw bags of rice and cans of meat into the water and then they quickly escape. Those dreadfully mutilated figures throw themselves into the water with loud cries (of hatred? despair? wild joy?).

Whoever can grab a part of the loot in the water, returns ashore, ready to defend it at any price, in terrible brawls that are started on the sand. That island is the prison and cemetery of the lepers of the Ivory Coast.

A little nun dressed in white comes out of the seaplane. It is Mother Eugenia, the Superior General of the Missionary Sisters. Her canoe touches the ground, and for a moment she remains petrified before those human remains all lined up on the coast, without realizing what is happening. But right away she rouses herself, holds out her arms, smiles and listens to their tragic and horrible stories. When the little nun leaves, she breaks out in tears of sorrow and anger.

Ten days later, in the garden of the Lyons convent, Mother Eugenia pours out her anger to the “gardener”, Raoul Follereau. Her great anger still upsets her: “In Europe there is war! Millions of francs spent for bombs and cannons! And down there the poorest beings in the world die of hunger and grim poverty! Twelve-year-old boys with no hands, with a disfigured face, sleeping in filth. Young women who have gone mad because of hunger. And we are playing war... I want to build a city in that forest. Not a hospice, but a city, where the lepers will no longer be piled up like animals, but treated like men, with all the respect and dignity they deserve. No walls that lock them away, that bound the sky and the horizon. Each family will have their own little house and their tiny garden. I will bring radios and the cinema, I will build laboratories where the lepers will be able to work, a hospital and a playground where children can run and laugh... I have 100 nuns who are ready to leave. Now I must find the millions”. Raoul felt in the little nun's voice a huge willpower, determined to do anything. But where could we find that money in a Paris devastated, occupied and pillaged? Mother Eugenia suddenly saw her “gardener” put down the hoe, wipe his sweat and say calmly: “I'll worry about the millions”.

Raoul Follereau leaves the convent. His fear of the military police has disappeared. “I only had one means at my disposal: my word. I started giving lectures”.

At his first lecture, at the municipal Theatre of Annecy, there is a very large audience. On the stage, next to Follereau, is seated a famous writer who introduced him to the audience. Raoul wrote a certain number of pages and he reads them in a loud voice and with ample gestures. Too ample. All of a sudden a sudden movement of his hand hits the glass of water which is on the table and it ends up on his sheets and on the famous writer's trousers. The latter doesn't get upset. He whispers to Raoul: “It doesn't matter, continue”. Follereau intends to continue, but with terror he sees that his soaked sheets are totally illegible. He closes his eyes, concentrates for a moment, and then dares to continue. His improvised speech, warm and nervous, receives gusts of applause. From that day on, Follereau will never write another speech.

Friend of the lepers (as he is immediately renamed) receives invitations from all over France. At the end of a tour which lasts three months, Follereau gives Mother Eugenia the first million francs. The seaplane leaves again for the lagoon of Abidjan.

In the difficult years that follow, while the war rages on, Follereau continues his crusade. And bleeding France breaks her black bread with the lepers of the Ivory Coast. In the virgin forest, a new town arises, Adzopé. The missionary nuns work with a hoe and spade, tear out a 15-kilometre road metre by metre and build three bridges on a swamp infested with caimans.

“Before doing anything, tells Mother Eugenia, we had to till, reclaim, clear and level the land. Cutting down the smaller trees was easy, almost. But there were some enormous trees, some had such hard wood that the axe couldn't scrape them. Others had trunks so wide that we needed three days to cut one of them down. And there were hundreds of them. And then came the rainy season, and we spent three months looking at the sky, doing nothing...”

The “battle of Adzopé” lasts ten years. In 1951 Mother Eugenia's dream is completely fulfilled: the lepers have their own city, there are white-stone houses, a modern hospital, and

(T. Bosio: “Siamo tutti lebbrosi” in PRIMAVERA no. 2 - 1974)

“The society of the sun”

We cannot summarize what Mother Eugenia accomplishes in Africa. Raoul Follereau has written and published two books: “Sur les Routes de la Charité” (On the roads of charity) with the subtitle: “22,000 km. above the Ocean and across the African forest with two missionary nuns”, according to the letters Mother Eugenia used to send her novices. They are as fascinating as an adventure story; in the future we will try to translate them and make an Italian edition.

What we wish to point out, instead, is the missionary style and ecumenical spirit of Mother Eugenia, who is also a prophet in this sense, anticipating the times by at least forty years. We will summarize only two of her accomplishments: “The Society of the Sun” and “The Children of the Father”.

In Egypt she is in close contact with Protestants, Israelites, Muslims and Orthodox. In the schools run by her Institute, only 20 percent of the girls who attend are Catholic and, for reasons of faith, a hateful discrimination against the followers of other religions has arisen. After all the girls' parents are very attached to their faith and don't appreciate any interference in this area: they send their daughters to Catholic schools only because they are much more qualified. What should be done?

She orders the headmasters of the schools to invite all the girls to catechism and lectures, however, they must abide by the following rule:

“You will not speak about the Catholic religion, but about justice, fortitude and all the other moral and social virtues. You will speak above all about the charity, goodness and love which we must have for our neighbour and for God. You will say that there is only one God who loves each and every one of us, who is the Father of all and therefore He is to be loved, served and honoured”.

She then gathers all the young girls and engages them in good deeds and establishes “The Society of the Sun” with them, whose flag is precisely a shining sun: just as the sun gives everyone light and heat, so the girls must always have a smile on their face, friendliness and goodness towards everyone. She then sends them in groups, on Thursdays, their day off, to visit the sick and the poor, who are numerous and need everything. The smaller girls, called “White Crosses”, stay close to the nuns who work in the clinics, with the precious task of looking after the children of the women who are being examined.

She practically puts into practice the program of St. Vincent de Paul and all our welfare activities, by adapting it according to the place and needs,

and teaching them to love. And to love means to know God and be united with our brothers: this is the essence of the Gospel.

However, when this initiative begins to catch on in an impressive way, Mother Eugenia is called upon by the Bishop of Eliopolis; she must interrupt everything, because otherwise *“They will confuse Catholic charity with their own; in this way they won't see the difference and they will never convert to our religion”*.

Mother Eugenia wasn't aware that charity had religious or national labels, but she obeys, as always: *“The hour had not come yet”*, she comments.

The children of the Father

In Lebanon Mother Eugenia finds people grouped together in small towns, isolated in winter because of the snow and even more isolated spiritually: they are the Druses, who have no guide or religious education, and a very low cultural education. Speaking to them about Catholicism is absurd.

Mother Eugenia begins to gather all the fathers and explains to them that their fatherhood comes from God the Father and it is his gift. Therefore they must represent God and act on his behalf; for this reason they have authority over their children whom they must bring up with a fear of God, respecting their conscience and choices when they become adults because that is how our Father in heaven treats us.

She then speaks to the youth about the duties they have towards their parents who represent God on earth.

For all of them it is a revelation that God takes care of each one of them and that he actually works and lives in them. They joyfully accept this reality of faith and, although they aren't used to subjecting themselves to anyone, they follow Mother Eugenia's advice literally.

The figure of the father acquires a new dignity; their children are more respectful and obedient. Peace and unity begins to reign in families because they are united around the father; every final decision is up to him, who makes it in the name of God, and it is accepted by all the members of the family.

Since they don't have priests of their own, the whole family goes to the square in front of the Maronite Catholics' church and, since they are prohibited from entering it, they follow the Mass from the outside, singing psalms in honour of the Father. When the Maronite brothers come out of the church, they all go to have tea together: Mother Eugenia taught them that they must accept each other and love each other, because they are all children of the same Father. In order for this belief to become rooted in them she creates the association *“The Children of the Father”*, which almost all of them belong to. Everyone united in the Father.

When she returns to Lebanon three years later, the *“children of the Father”* give her a triumphal reception. In her honour they put on a play about the martyrs of Rome and the following Sunday one about St. Theresa of the Child Jesus.

However, the most beautiful thing is that she can see the effects of grace which this devotion to the Father has brought amongst them: divorces and separations have almost disappeared; families are united around their earthly father; children, seeing the respect which their fathers receive, feel that fatherhood and the family are the greatest fulfilments of themselves, and they place these values at the centre of their interests.

The Druses in Lebanon whom Mother Eugenia has approached haven't been officially converted to Catholicism and not even to Christianity, but they have begun to carry out in their world Jesus' greatest aspiration: *“Father, may they be one in You...”*. There are no more distinctions between Catholics, Maronites and Druses.

However, even this initiative will soon be condemned and consequently dissolved.

During the war

This is the most difficult and most glorious period of her long generalship, during which she receives one insult after another because Italy and France are enemies, and she is Italian. However, she keeps silent in these circumstances as well:

“Before those offensive words, I remembered Jesus' words, that He had come for the glory of the Father. When they concerned me, I defended myself, like Jesus, with my silence. My only judge and defender was Jesus. Jesus knew how to defend me and He has always defended me”.

And Jesus defends her in God's way, that is, with facts.

The beginning of the war coincides with the creation of Adzopé and Mother Eugenia's many other initiatives in the French colonies of Africa. She had the brilliant intuition to film what she and her nuns are accomplishing, using the first movie camera on the market, and this gives her the possibility to give interesting documentary-lectures which are a great success. The civil authorities don't let this opportunity pass them by and they open the doors of the most prestigious French cinemas and theatres for her, starting with the Odeon in Paris. She is introduced as the modern Joan of Arc, the heroine who brings love into the world in the name of France and in the name of God. The enthusiastic ovations she receives everywhere are also for France; the political authorities are very happy to be able to rebut the charges, using well-founded arguments, of exploiting and not looking after the indigenous peoples of the colonies.

The fact remains that Mother Eugenia, without offending those who insult her because she is Italian, soon becomes one of the most famous and admired personalities in France, a symbol of love and hope in a very difficult moment for the nation.

As a member of the Red Cross she receives permission to use the military columns, ships and war planes in order to get to wherever she wants.

For several months, sharing bread and risks with the soldiers (how grateful she will always be for the soldiers' kindness during their time together!), she runs to wherever there is greater danger: in South Africa when she is invaded by yellow and bilial fever, and from Portonovo she launches a desperate SOS via radio, live with France, following which the first steamships arrive with all kinds of relief; in North Africa when there is typhus fever; in Europe, under constant bombings to help her brothers in danger, without any distinction regarding their ideology or nationality.

The most difficult thing is governing the nuns of many nations that are fighting each other. Now, more than ever, the charismatic figure of Mother Eugenia stands out: she is able to keep all the nuns united by raising them above every border, giving them a nation that is the world and an ideal that is the glory of the Father who gathers together all the peoples of the earth in love and peace.

She is present everywhere she has a religious house: by crossing the firing lines several times, she runs to Lyons, Reims, Paris, Calais, Holland and Ireland in order to instil courage, strength and apostolic zeal into her daughters.

She orders everyone not to move from their posts, especially from those more exposed to danger, and to put themselves at the disposal of their suffering brothers in order to help them, encourage them and assist them when they are ill and above all when they are dying: this is the moment in which they must love and do good, only good.

The religious houses are placed at the service of refugees, the sick, children left orphans in the bombings, the abandoned elderly and the wounded. Once the living are assisted, she goes to bury the dead.

Little Eugenia's witness of love receives the response of the witness of our Father in heaven who surrounds her with light and miracles: the mother house in Lyons is the only religious house which is still open in

the city, and it is also the only building left standing within a radius of many kilometres. All around there is rubble, however the bombs are not allowed to cross the cloister walls. The only drawback is repairing the windows which are continuously broken by the blasts.

But if the convent is a shelter zone - among the guests there is the Archbishop of Cambrai and many priests - outside there is death and destruction. Between one bombing and the next, Mother Eugenia, along with her sisters, goes to gather the corpses that lie under the rubble and along the streets, however she often finds only human scraps.

She now writes one of the most brilliant chapters of her life: by putting together the members of several corpses, she reassembles a human body in every coffin and offers it to the Father so that He might absolve him and receive him in his Kingdom. In this act, Mother Eugenia puts all her immense love for man, for man who is God's masterpiece.

This brings back to mind the Mother Eugenia who in the Ivory Coast digs with her hands in the ground where the lepers are buried alive; but in this almost absurd attempt to reassemble man at any cost, there is only a supernatural faith and love. A love which desperately tries to reconstruct what hatred has destroyed, a love for man which doesn't give up even before death which blows him to pieces, a love which she draws directly from the heart of the Father. Of the Father whose love is "*more powerful than death, more powerful than sin and every evil*" (Dives in Misericordia VIII, 15) and which possesses in itself the power to give his children a new and more splendid life beyond death.

Her Passion begins

Mother Eugenia's twelve-year generalship expires (1935-47), and the preparations to elect a new Superior are well under way. All the nuns are thinking of reconfirming Mother Eugenia, who is in fact elected unanimously for the second time.

Nevertheless, the Father has other plans, more than ever marked by the cross. The time of "Hosanna!" is over and the time of "Crucify!" begins in a passion which will last until the end of her life.

According to the classical standard, this latter period begins with a betrayal: the Judas on duty is a nun whom she particularly loves; she has a weak nervous system and other frailties, and at times Mother Eugenia has brought her along as a secretary and she has allowed her to study in order to help her overcome her difficulties.

Padre Pio from Pietralcina once said that every Christ must have his Judas. Mother Eugenia, from this moment on, will find several Judases along her way, and each time it will be the beginning of a new Calvary.

This little nun has become fond of travelling and she doesn't want to stay in one place, even if she is in charge. She has become especially fond of Mother Eugenia and she wants to stay close to her at any cost. Immediately after her re-election, she gives her an ultimatum: "*Either you elect me as your secretary, or else I will take revenge*".

Mother Eugenia is not the type of person to give in to this kind of blackmail and, after discussing the matter with the Bishop of Grenoble, Mons. Caillot, she rejects her request; after all, the choice of a secretary is up to the chapter and not her.

Four months later, the would-be secretary, accompanied by her religious brother, goes to Rome and accuses Mother Eugenia at the Holy Office of continuing to spread the devotion to the Father; of not removing the images from the various houses of the Institute as she was ordered, and lastly of treating her immorally.

At the Holy Office

Mother Eugenia is called to Rome and she stays in the house of Marino. Eight days later, two religious priests go to see her and the usual speech begins: "*You are accused of wanting to make the Father known*".

Mother Eugenia doesn't answer, because both the Bishop of Grenoble and his Vicar, Mons. Guerry - her spiritual director who will later be appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Cambrai - have ordered her to no longer speak about the Father to anyone but them. She keeps silent, as always, because she realizes that another enquiry is beginning and Jesus, her one and true Master, taught her that in these cases the only valid word is silence. She also keeps silent when she must account for the charges of immorality: *"I didn't know these kinds of sins existed - she will later say with bitter humour - the people at the Holy Office explained to me what they consist of"*.

In her regal silence, Mother Eugenia must have heard the echo in her heart of the consecration prayer she made to Jesus on the day of her profession: *"What is most dear to me is my honour, I give it to you also..."*

This time the storm is much more violent than the others, because it doesn't start from the outskirts, but from the summit of the Church. This is the moment in which those who respect and admire her - after having one proof after another of the action of God in Mother Eugenia - should come to her defence, comfort her, bear witness to her. But Mother Eugenia can only say disappointingly: *"In the moment of trial even the wisest and holiest men abandoned me and didn't even lift a finger to defend me"*. This reminds us of Paul who writes to Timothy: *"At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me"* (2Tim 4,16).

The going is getting tougher. Mother Eugenia has given everything to her Institute, she has now accomplished the first part of her mission, and she must prepare herself to open up new horizons of an ecclesiastic importance. She has succeeded in making the Father pervade the sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles, now she must convey this message to the whole Church, and to all humanity. This new prophetic dimension requires a much higher price than the one paid up until now.

In her offering to the Father, in Jesus and with Jesus Crucified. She had also told him: *"You are my Love, my Father, my King, I will remain in*

Your house completely striving for You in a continuous oblation with You in every moment and every day united with You in every Holy Mass...". And the universal Father doesn't hesitate to immolate his daughter for all his children, as He did with Jesus. It will be a continual sacrifice, a living Mass offered every day so that the Father may enter into the hearts of his children.

What we will write from now on is only a chronicle. A concise and often vile chronicle in which we will scarcely mention all that Mother Eugenia will go through for the remainder of her existence. It is a too recent story; many of the characters who put it together are still alive, and charity doesn't want any names made or any details revealed.

"Poor sister Eugenia"

When Mother Eugenia is called to Propaganda Fide she is presented with two resignation declarations and she is asked to sign the one she prefers. She chooses the one in which she declares that she is leaving her position because she is *"incompetent"*: *"For the love of God, I chose the most humiliating one and I signed: "Poor sister Eugenia"*. From now on she will always sign her name in this way.

The moment in which the Superior General Mother Eugenia becomes "poor sister Eugenia" she feels the need to accomplish Unitas Catholica. Since she entered the Institute, twenty years before, and being in contact with the many divisions present in the convent, she had hoped for a new type of community in which everyone would consider themselves brothers in the same Father. She had tried to accomplish this ideal within her Congregation and the *"Association of kindness"* is the first sign. Then, during her mission, she attempted with *"The Society of the Sun"* and *"The Children of the Father"*.

The foundation of this conception of universal brotherhood is a religious congregation in which its members, all consecrated to the Father for the

cause of unity, convey this spirit to all men, of every nation and religion, beginning with the strengthening of families who are God's most important temple of unity.

Unitas Catholica

“When I left Propaganda Fide, where I had abandoned my position as Mother General into the hands of Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi, I went to abandon my position as Spiritual Mother into the hands of Our Lady of Miracles, in Sant'Andrea delle Fratte, the Madonna who converted the Jewish Ratisbonne. All the souls God had entrusted to me, whom I loved just as God loved them, for whom I had made every kind of sacrifice; those souls for whom I had endangered my life thousands of times, and for one of them I was ready to give my life, all those souls I took from my bleeding heart and put them into the sweet, maternal heart of Mary. Once more I offered my life for them.

There, at the feet of Our Lady, I felt a superhuman strength.

I understood that it was time to plant this little grain of suffering, so that it could one day make Unitas Catholica spring up. I know they will try to stifle this seed, but one day it will grow, shining in the world and in the hearts of all - from the Holy Father to the last faithful - everyone will speak about the Father who is and will always be the Alpha and Omega of our life and of our unity in ourselves, in our families and in the Church”.

Has Mother Eugenia ever realized that in this moment of agony she is conceiving, in Mary, with Mary and for Mary, not a small religious congregation but a new Church, the Church of the Father?

Probably not. She clearly sees that her mission among the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles is finished, and she focuses everything on the foundation of another religious congregation, precisely the Unitas Catholica:

“I prayed and abandoned myself at the feet of Our Lady so that I would lose myself completely in Her. I decided that I would continue my religious life like a little nun, devoting myself only to the position my Superiors would give me. For five years I will remain in the greatest humiliation before beginning the Unitas Catholica. I will hide in the bosom of the Father; my aim will be to remain silent, obedient, to make myself little, to accept, love, pray and work. I renewed my consecration to Our Lady and little and naked, I returned to our House in Marino”.

The seed rots

After a few days, in Marino they show her a letter which Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi has sent out to all Cardinals and Bishops in the dioceses where the Missionaries of Our Lady of the Apostles work, with the order to remove the remaining images of the Father.

From Marino she writes a circular letter to all the nuns in order to take her leave from them in the name of God, but this letter is never mailed.

By order of Propaganda Fide she is sent to the mother house in Lyons, to receive the novices' profession, until the new Mother General is elected. This will be, at her own suggestion, sister Odilia, her former secretary and Counsellor General.

In Marino she is entrusted with the care of the orphaned children, and she performs this task for two and a half years in an atmosphere of tension and hostility. She is not allowed to talk or write to anyone, not even her family. She cannot go into the garden or courtyard.

She constantly hears every kind of comment about herself: that she was excommunicated; that she was punished because of disobedience; that she had to resign because she contracted large debts, and many other things. It seems as though her fellow sisters are competing to see who can talk bigger, by scoring merit points.

Naturally, she remains silent.

In the mother house of Lyons festivity is in the air: the institute is given the most prestigious French award for social merit: the Couronne Civique.

Following are the main points of a newspaper article:

“Paris, 4 June 1950. Amphitheatre of the Sorbonne. Feast of Charity, a large and enthusiastic audience. The former minister of Public Health, Admiral Lacaze of the French Academy, the representatives of Government and Public Authorities. Sitting in the front-row is the President of the Republic and the Minister of Health. The President of the Republic gives the 1950 Couronne Civique to Reverend Mother Odilia, Superior General, and Reverend Mother Julie-Louise, Vice Superior General, representatives of the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles.

The President, with a cordial gesture, holds out his hand to the two missionaries and adds, deeply touched: “In the name of humanity, thank you sisters!”. And after a warm handshake, he repeats: “All of humanity thanks you”.

The enthusiastic crowd applauds.

The military band of the Republican Guards plays a triumphal march”.

Poor sister Eugenia is not mentioned. In those days, she hears the sounds of other fanfares: a nun whom she helped, who had been sent away from the Italian novitiate because she suffered from asthma, and who she had taken care of and allowed her to make her profession in France, confronts her and rattles off to her the whole litany of insults that are said about her in the community. She concludes by urging her to repent in time, as long as she is alive.

After listening to her in silence, sister Eugenia thanks her and with a smile asks her to pray for her. The little nun completely loses control and starts to inveigh against her.

This is poor sister Eugenia's fanfare. From now on it will always play these marches.

In Palermo

In October 1950 the Superiors send her to Palermo, in a house which she established when she was Mother General, with the task of organizing Catholic Action, catechism and the clinic.

In Palermo she works in the clinic from eight o'clock in the morning to one o'clock in the afternoon, then she distributes food to the children and, after afternoon prayers she devotes herself to Catholic Action. In a short time she manages to form the various male and female divisions and every evening the sisters' little Oratory is packed with a particular group: youth, women, men, children. Sunday is reserved for the Female Youth Group.

Among these girls is a university student who is elected president of the Female Youth Group and who, in the mysterious plans of Providence, will then follow Mother Eugenia in order to keep the little flame of Unitas burning.

Cardinal Ruffini, the Archbishop of Palermo, follows with interest what is happening in this corner of his diocese and he gathers information about this nun who is working with amazing energy.

Naturally, the nuns are seized with a covert jealousy for this former Mother General who never gives up and who continues to gain attention even after all that she is said to have done. They get together to make life difficult for her and to create a void around her, and they succeed at least materially: when she is late for meals they clear her table (and this happens very often), and when she has to give lectures, they remove the table and chairs from the room.

It is obvious that she doesn't receive any letters, for this reason she won't even find out about the agony of one of her brothers.

The community's confessor orders her to burn all her writings. Thus the Month of the Father, of Our Lady, of the Sacred Heart and of the Souls

in Purgatory go up in smoke; as well as all her lectures for the novices, professed nuns, Superiors, etc.

But, as always, she goes ahead. She is writing the Constitution of the Unitas Catholica which she will submit to Cardinal Ruffini, who encourages her and blesses her.

On 16 June 1952 the Cardinal sends for her and tells her: *“Before, you were the cornerstone of your institute, now you are the stumbling stone. Leave the institute and establish the Unitas Catholica within a month. I will give you a house in Termini Imerese and my approval. If you wait a day longer than a month, you will have to leave Palermo”*.

The Cardinal talked to her in this way because he knows what is taking shape in Rome against poor sister Eugenia. She feels the Cardinal is right, but she doesn't want to ask for the dispensation from her vows; she takes time to pray and asks her spiritual director for advice. Instead of asking the Holy Office directly for the dispensation, she writes to the Mother General for the permission to establish the Unitas Catholica within the institute itself.

She was Mother General, but they never told her about the strategy of anticipation and surprise: she will be caught off guard.

In Holland

Instead of the Superior General's letter, sister Eugenia receives a letter from the Holy Office in which she is summoned to Rome on 16 July, feast of Our Lady of Carmel.

She is told she must leave the institute, and in the meantime she is sent by plane to a house in Holland, awaiting the dispensation from her vows. She stays there for a few months, during which she returns to her first love: sweeping the house. With a moving candour she writes to the

Mother General several times, asking for the permission to found the Unitas Catholica within the institute, but naturally she doesn't receive a response.

On the day of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. John in Lateran, 9 November, she has a serious haemorrhage caused by a perforated duodenal ulcer and she remains in bed, immobile, for a month, with ice in her mouth and on her forehead.

On 28 December, the day after the feast of St. John and the feast of the Holy Innocents, she receives the dispensation from her vows in a sealed envelope, from the Holy Office, which she must give to the Bishop in whose diocese she intends to remain. Only later on will she find out that in that envelope she is prohibited from establishing the new congregation of Unitas Catholica.

Two days later, even though she can hardly stand, she is ordered to leave and is accompanied by train to Milan where her relatives and the girl she met in Palermo are waiting for her.

When the nun who is with her returns her to her relatives in tears, like an inconvenient baggage which is returned to the sender, she has the courtesy to tell them that sister Eugenia must go back into the world because she was disobedient.

She is rushed to a clinic, because she is very sick following the fatigue of the journey and here, as soon as she gets into bed, the delicate sister orders her to give back her habit, veil and ring. In exchange, she gives her a little suitcase with a pair of velvet gloves, a sleeveless blouse, a very short skirt, a silk slip, a veil for her head, a pair of grey stockings and another dress which wouldn't fit her even if more material was added: this is what she receives in exchange for her trousseau which cost her eight years of work. She also gives her the sixteen million liras she had brought twenty years before, and therefore she can pay for the clinic and buy some material with which her sister Teresa makes her another nun-like dress.

As a consequence of this great suffering, her sister Teresa dies a few days later.

In Southern Italy

At the end of January 1953 she goes to Reggio Calabria accompanied by the student who had stood by her, who met her in Milan and who now gave her hospitality at her home. Here, on 1st February she receives the visit of a priest sent from the Curia of the town - whom the girl had previously contacted - and he invites her to go to the Bishop. The next day, 2 February, feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, she goes to His Excellency who proves to be well-informed of her situation and invites her to work in some poor neighbourhood. He also allows her to continue to wear the habit she had made in Milan and advises her to renew her vows with her confessor. Sister Eugenia gives him the sealed letter she received from the Holy Office and asks for his blessing for what she is about to begin. The Bishop blesses her and ends the meeting telling her: *“Do good and work always”*.

She is practically allowed to begin her apostolate in an unofficial way.

On that same day, after choosing the poorest neighbourhood (without electricity, without water, without a nursery school and without a church), she rolls her sleeves up and, without taking care of her ulcer which still bothers her a lot, she attacks according to her style.

She begins by making home visits, but she soon realizes that she cannot do much without putting a permanent base. Therefore she goes to France and obtains from her godmother and from other benefactors an initial amount in order to purchase 5,000 square metres of land; then she contacts the English and French consuls and these too gladly commit themselves to help her, well aware of the work she has done for many years in their colonies. Even the Little Brothers of the Poor give her a contribution and she thus scrapes together the seven million necessary to purchase the land.

When she goes to sign the contract, the Bishop, who has examined the Holy Office's prohibition, tells her that the woman who followed her and gave her hospitality also has to sign the act of purchase, otherwise she won't be granted permission to carry out the initiative. Once again, Sister Eugenia obeys the Church authorities.

Two months later, the first six rooms and a little church are ready. She opens the kindergarten, the after-school program, night school, sewing school, knitting school and the nursery school for babies. The latter wasn't taken into account, but it is necessary since one night sister Eugenia finds a newborn baby girl left on top of a pile of rubble: she is called Severina, and she will be the first of a long series of abandoned babies who are welcomed into the house. She will later die when she is eight years old, after her First Communion.

With regard to this, there is an anecdote which is worth telling: the two women cannot be present everywhere, and the greatest problem is that of the babies. She resolves the matter with a little lamb which was given to them and which grazes among the cribs, licking the babies who wake up crying and rocking their cribs with their head until they fall asleep again.

A committee is made up of the most well-known personalities in the city and with their help they obtain water and electricity for the neighbourhood.

People begin to pack the little church and poor sister Eugenia has a hard time convincing priests to go to celebrate mass in that slum and dreaded neighbourhood, where “death to priests and nuns” is written on the walls and from which the Bishop was kicked out with stones the previous year. On the day of the inauguration of the house and the church, in the presence of all the authorities, the Bishop is welcomed with songs and applause, to the sound of the band.

Padre Pio

The house goes along fairly well, but poor sister Eugenia is thinking of expanding the activity, she is the great bulldozer which knocks things

down and leaves the finishing touches to others. However, more people are needed to help her and so with pleasure she welcomes the invitation made by her aunt nun (sister Vetusta, the sister of father Carlo), the Superior at the hospital of Torremaggiore, near Foggia, who wants to introduce her to two nurses who want to become nuns.

Along with the two girls, she goes to San Giovanni Rotondo to attend Mass celebrated by Padre Pio, determined to continue on to Genoa or Milan where she plans to open the novitiate house. At the end of the Mass, while he is returning to the sacristy, Padre Pio turns towards the part of the church where she is standing, hidden in the crowd, and shouts in a loud voice: *“Not Genoa and Milan! Go to Rome, where my spiritual children will help you!”*.

Sister Eugenia understands that he is talking to her and, without even trying to ask him for an explanation, she changes route and heads towards Rome, trusting in Providence and even in Padre Pio's words. He will keep his promise twenty-five years later.

In Rome

She arrives in Rome on 15 August 1956.

With lengthy and patient work, we were able to reconstruct part of the events in which sister Eugenia was involved in these last twenty-five years, a succession of turn of events, contradictions and strange situations that we can explain only by faith. There are powerful surges of light and darkness which clash and cause a continuous cyclone against poor sister Eugenia who is safe because she is in the eye of the storm, where absolute peace reigns: in the heart of the Father.

But in the meantime she must go where the cyclone brings her, and she will find herself in situations and places for which only God knows the reason; she restricts herself to saying her “yes” without understanding why.

There's no point in making a chronological and detailed account of the people and events: there would often arise stories of selfishness, betrayal, cowardice, blackmail and nonsense which, at least for the moment, it is better not to mention.

What we can do is try to understand how hell can create so much chaos: two worlds clash: the bulldozer and the paper work, the strong freshness of Africa and the complex European technicalities.

Since sister Eugenia is used to knocking down forests in Africa, she gets caught up in a in a lot of red tape and, since she is a bulldozer, once she is set in motion she easily gets carried away without even realizing it. This is her only defect, and this also justifies the anxiety, and almost terror with which her Superiors try to stop her every time she moves.

In Africa she had a lot of space where her human and spiritual personality could explode and find fulfilment. In Europe there is little space, and at every corner she finds one-way streets and no parking signs. A big bulldozer designed to level mountains cannot work in an old town centre where at every move she makes she bumps into some sacred ruins.

In Africa, when she felt the moral obligation to build the lepers' city in Adzopé, she presented her plan to the governor, asked for his permission and for land and then accomplished what she had planned by clearing hectares of centuries-old forest.

Now she is in Italy, and she feels the need to create a religious organization for unity; she speaks to her direct Superiors about it and she is formally forbidden to do so. Fine, let others do it and take the credit for it, as others received medals and praise and fanfares for Adzopé, nevertheless, as long as it is done.

She obtained permission to start to work in this way from a Bishop, she only asks to be able to work in order to accomplish what she considers the will of God.

Before leaving Reggio Calabria she had informed her friend and the ecclesiastic Superior appointed by the Curia - the Bishop is absent during this time - of her intention to open a novitiate house in Rome.

She leaves along with the first two recruits, taking for granted that the paper work will be taken care of by the Curia itself.

However, since nothing was formalized, the latter doesn't send any official communication to Rome and sister Eugenia will soon be the target of the vicariate, the Congregation for the Religious and the Congregation of the Holy Office.

Padre Pio was the one who sent her to Rome, and this explains the amusing resentment she will always harbour against him: he had promised her the help of his spiritual children, and now she finds herself - alone - in a tangle of ecclesiastic canons, which she cannot escape.

In Rome, the land of martyrs

Since the early days of the Church, Rome has always been the destination of saints who travelled there to be martyred. It is one of its privileges as "caput Ecclesiae", just like the new Jerusalem where, by divine decree, the prophets must find their death.

Poor sister Eugenia, re-routed in extremis to Rome, tries to settle down, and starts to get mixed up in a series of misfortunes. The vicariate accuse her of wearing the religious habit without permission and of being in the Eternal City without proper permission. She explains by saying that she had informed the Bishop of the diocese she comes from and in which she has worked for three years. But when the vicariate calls the Bishop, he claims he never issued any permission and it follows that both sides point a series of accusations against her. The Holy Office is called upon, but Cardinal Ottaviani, who is in charge, much to everyone's amazement, takes the defence of "poor sister Eugenia" whom he had met many years before: he bears a profound respect for her, which he will always show her.

The vicariate and the Bishop of provenance therefore make almost the same decision: they both instruct a priest to keep an eye on the situation. As a result, sister Eugenia often receives different orders and, willing to obey everyone because she sees the Church in everyone, she finds herself in contradictory situations which convince the Superiors more and more that they are dealing with a disobedient, stubborn and lying woman.

In this atmosphere sister Eugenia is forced to change her place of residence dozens of times, often sleeping in the train stations outside of Rome because she is forbidden from spending the night in the city; for several months she must go to the pastor of a town near Rome, twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, to prove that she is staying in the area; she is intimidated with a series of threats whose purpose is to make her become disobedient, but which virtually frighten her, thus giving several people (even the clergy) the possibility to extort considerable amounts of money from her by blackmailing her with further retaliations. We could go on with other accounts.

If someone could tell about all the situations in which poor sister Eugenia finds herself, reporting them chronologically, in brief flashes, he would be called neurotic. In order to give a general idea, let us only summarize the episodes of her third religious dispossession.

"Muffled up like a an old hag"

Sister Eugenia has just settled down, after many years of running away and moving, in a small apartment on via Laurentina, along with seven young girls who want to begin a religious life with her; they are the survivors, because many have gotten lost along the way, which is understandable.

The Bishop of Reggio Calabria goes to visit them, encourages the young women and leaves them a religious as his representative and director. He entrusts the job of running the house to sister Eugenia.

A few weeks later, the vicariate orders her to take off her religious habit. For the third time sister Eugenia removes the religious habit, “*worse than if they had torn off her skin*” she comments, and she must stay in bed because she has nothing to wear.

A few months later, by order of Cardinal Ottaviani, she is once again blessed and her veil is returned to her. In fact, after a week of spiritual exercises, at the hands of the Bishop's delegate, the habit is given to the girls who are with her. Everything takes place during an official ceremony after which Cardinal Ottaviani receives them in the Holy Office.

It remains a mystery how such contradictory and unusual things can happen one after the other.

The only explanation comes from a spiritual point of view: hell doesn't like sister Eugenia and doesn't like the religious habit she wears as a sign and witness of faithfulness to the Father and to the Church; by causing confusion and misunderstanding, since it is unable to tear this immense love from her heart, it tries to tear off her habit.

Poor sister Eugenia stays in bed and pretends to be sick because she has nothing to wear, but in reality it is an alibi because she is ashamed to let herself be seen in public without her religious habit.

In a silent desperate call for help, she raises her eyes to a big Crucifix hanging on the wall and the good Lord, always full of humour, manages to give her a spark of comfort: “*What are you complaining about? At least you have some rags to wear. Can't you see how I was nailed to the cross naked, and people continue to portray me naked, convinced that they are giving me honour?*”

Sister Eugenia jumps out of bed without saying another word and she resumes her activities without breathing a word, even if she must go around “*muffled up like an old hag*”, as the pastor of Montagnola will tell her.

In prison

Poor sister Eugenia has been in hospital and in a mental hospital; the only things that is missing is the experience of prison in order to completely live through the most bitter human situations. And this, too, occurs.

While she is working in the garden under a light drizzle in Anzio, she sees a police car coming. The police ask her where Elisabetta Ravasio is and when she answers: “*It's me*”, they ask her to get into the car even though she is soaking wet.

It's evening, and during the trip she falls sound asleep: the Father gives her this gift in the most difficult moments. When the car stops, they wake her up: “*Are we at the house in Via Alba?*” she asks naively. “*No, at Rebibbia*” is their response. It is the prison.

She finds herself locked up in prison without knowing how and why: she didn't read the morning papers which, with a headline on eight-columns, speak about the “*billionaire nun*” and all the evil she has supposedly done in order to become rich. She will discover the reasons for her arrest only four months later, from the judge who will finally go to see her to interrogate her before releasing her on bail.

The charges are as grave as they are absurd: that she established the Unitas Catholica “*for the sole purpose of obtaining unlawful earnings by means of regular begging and fraud*”; “*that she deceived the members of the community by making them believe that the money obtained through the collection of alms would be used for charitable purposes of the institute and making them hand over amounts of money (for a total of several hundreds of millions) which she fully appropriated and used for her personal intentions*”; “*that she used the members for hard manual labour and subjected them to continuous violations of their physical and moral integrity and in particular induced them to the very hard work of collecting alms... sending the beggars around the city with a habit worn unlawfully*”.

We have quoted the more serious charges in quotation marks because they were taken from the acts of the trial. Finally sister Eugenia knows why she is in prison: the nuns have denounced her, once again. She could explain her arguments to the judge, and could justify herself. But to what purpose?

She could prove that the house in Rome in via Alba was purchased with the money which Mime Germaine Chevalier La Barthes from Nantes, who nurtured a profound love and veneration for her, gave her for this purpose, and that to reach the sum of 48 million, needed for the purchase, she had to sell all her gold; that the land in Anzio was paid using the four million given by the scholar Rev. Father Vincenzo Tepedino, who by this gesture also wanted to thank her for what she did for his ill mother; that the remaining four million were given to her by her French friends, Mime Neron de Champolion and Mr. Eng. Duranton. But to what purpose?

She could show the list of all the children who were given hospitality in Anzio in order to prove that the “*charitable purposes*” were not “*false*”. But what's the use? She could reply to the accusation of sending the nuns around town with an “*unlawfully worn*” habit, by appealing to the clothing ceremony which took place publicly before a Church representative, with the consent of a Cardinal. But to what purpose?

She could explain that the collection of alms carried out by a few nuns cannot bring in “*hundreds of millions*”; that it isn't “*hard work*”, and that she didn't invent it: many religious organizations send their members to collect money, and this is even more justifiable for an emerging congregation that has no other proceeds. But to what purpose?

She could point out that the girls who came to her of their own free will wanted to give themselves to God in a life of sacrifice which she herself lead - she is a true example of this! - and not to demand rights by firing accusations behind her back; that the “*hard manual labour*” which those poor girls supposedly were forced to do consisted simply in digging the garden in order to build a cellar, and which she had done for the most part

on her own because they weren't able to do it: she had dug with the same hands that in Africa had unearthed the lepers by scraping off the ground with her nails. But to what purpose?

The hour of darkness

In the light of God, that is in the light of the Truth, the “scandal” caused around poor sister Eugenia by the charges and her consequent arrest is the most massive assault that the prince of darkness - this is his hour - has organized in order to put out the light which lives in her.

This had happened other times (as soon as she entered the novitiate, at the mother house in Lyons, in the diocesan enquiry, in Africa, etc...), but never in such a broad and determined manner. Hell must have made a cardiac effort to succeed in hurling everything and everyone at her, at the same time: her sisters who betray and denounce her; her Superiors who excommunicate her; the press which in eight columns describes the monstrosity of this slave-driver and billionaire “*pseudo-nun*”; the court which explains the various charges made with the same eloquent power as the newspapers: one might say that it was inspired by them; her acquaintances and admirers who now quickly shirk.

Mother Eugenia says nothing at all to the judge who, four months later, comes to interrogate her. What's the use? She only needs a bit of silence: she will retire to Anzio, alone, for ten years.

Anzio

Poor sister Eugenia stays in Anzio for the longest period of her life, about ten years, which can be summarized in a few words: silence, work, prayer.

This is a new experience for her who has always been in the whirl of activities and every kind of human contact. Only in heaven will we see

what her spirit experienced in these ten years of continuous contact with her Father. She doesn't speak much about it and we won't disturb God's silence with indiscreet and useless questions.

However, once in awhile she tells us something, at least regarding external events, and this made us understand that they weren't years of vacation, neither materially nor spiritually. In Anzio she once more suffered hunger, cold and fear. She must have certainly experienced profound spiritual battles, which in the desert become more violent and refined, as Jesus himself experienced.

Ten years sprinkled with the radiant participation of the Father who continues to bear witness to this unique daughter in an original and delicate way. We will only report the episode of the bread, which Mother Eugenia couldn't hide, because some people from France who used to visit her were present.

One rainy day sister Eugenia begins to smell the scent of bread fresh out of the oven. She is very hungry, as always, and she thinks she is having olfactory hallucinations; but the smell continues, and in fact it becomes stronger. She follows its trail and finds a big loaf of bread in the middle of the lawn, steaming as if it had just come out of the oven, and dry in spite of the rain.

She brings it into the house, without knowing what to think. Then her hunger prevails over her thoughts and she begins to eat. She keeps on cutting, day after day; but the loaf of bread doesn't run out. Her French friends notice it and ask her for a piece of this bread to bring back to France: she cuts fifty slices, but the shape is always the same. Sister Eugenia goes ahead for several months with this bread: it is always fresh and fragrant.

We have related this episode, not because it is "miraculous", but because we consider it to be "prophetic": we believe the Father wanted us to understand, with this extraordinary fact, what Mother Eugenia's mission

is: to make herself "bread", a living Eucharist to nourish humanity in despair and feed it with the bread of the word which the Father gave her in the Message of Mercy "The Father speaks to His Children", the Word God gave to our generation, which has been spiritually hardened by materialism and by historical and practical atheism.

Mother Eugenia: a prophet in our times

On the steamboat which goes from Tangier to Marseille the sirens suddenly sound and the megaphone gives the order to go on deck. A boiler has burst and the ship has sprung a leak and is slowly starting to lean over.

On board is also Mother Eugenia who goes on deck and in vain tries to calm the throng which the passengers create around the life boats.

A mother holding her baby, stricken with terror, clings to her because she is so peaceful in such chaos. Mother Eugenia smiles at her and asks her to hand over her baby to her. The woman obeys her like a robot, subdued by the profound peace which radiates from this young nun who takes the baby, raises him to up towards heaven and with her melodious voice starts singing: "*I believe in You, Lord, I believe in you...*".

The baby's mother joins in the song, followed by many other people. The song becomes more and more steady, and soon the whole deck becomes a big stage from which the most moving chorus which the angels have ever heard rises to the Father. Everyone sings together - passengers, officers and sailors; the terror which a few moments before was overwhelming everyone now seems centuries away.

*"Father,
for the sake of this child,
for this innocence, save us!"*

This is the prayer Mother Eugenia addressed to the Father for everyone, in everyone's name. And innocence, which has become a prayer in a

hymn of faith, rends the heavens. Very slowly the ship resumes the water-line and keeps the sea until the port of Marseille.

All the passengers and crew members - many of them barefoot - lead by mother Eugenia go to the sanctuary of Our Lady of the Guard to thank her.

Prophetic language is made up of words and gestures that strengthen the word and give it an eloquent and almost three-dimensional power. Mother Eugenia is a prophet in the fullest meaning of the word, in her “words” and in her “gestures”, who summarizes all the prophets in order to give man the most splendid announcement: our Father in heaven has for us his children only plans of life and mercy, we just have to call him “Father!” and he will clothe us with light, as in the parable of the prodigal son.

This is what mother Eugenia tells each one of us with the prophetic “word” of the Message *“The Father speaks to His Children”*.

The baby she raises to heaven is the “gesture” with which the “word” is made perfect and it is addressed in particular to the Church: the boat of Peter is in danger, at times it seems as if it were sinking; if, through Mary, the Church offers to the Father the innocence of children, His Heart will send forth a miraculous power which will transform everything into love.

The action of Mary is summarized in that “gesture”; for more than a hundred years she has always appeared to children: La Salette 1846, Lourdes 1854, Pontmain 1871, Beauring 1932, Banneux 1933, Tre Fontane Rome 1944, Medjugorje 1981, etc. But at Fatima this plan of the Spirit is manifested with extreme clarity, when the *“Woman more shining than the sun”* asks Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta (10, 9 and 7 years old) to make a total and free offering of themselves to the Father: *“Are you willing to offer yourselves to God, ready to accept what He will send you, for peace in the world and for the conversion of sinners?”* The three children answered “Yes!” and thanks to that “yes” Portugal was spared from World War II.

The conclusion is simple: if, because of three children, Mary was able to save a nation from a heavy war, with the “yes” of millions of children she will save the world.

“Children will save the world”, Saint Pio from Pietralcina affirmed several times, asking insistently for the formation of children's Nests of Prayer along with adult Prayer Groups. This was reasserted by his soul mate, the Servant of God Padre Pio Dellepiane, a friar minor, who desired the Armata Bianca of Our Lady: “We need five million children who will consecrate themselves to God in the spirit of Fatima, following the example of the three Shepherd children, in order to save the world”.

His Holiness John Paul II granted this request and for the first time in history, on 27 May 1989, he received 10,000 children of the Armata Bianca in a special audience; in his presence they consecrated themselves to God for peace in the world. On 9 November of the same year, thanks to their offering, the Berlin Wall fell and with it Communism, without the shedding of blood.

With humility and heart-felt conviction we ask the Church to receive the message of salvation which, through Mary and the Saints, it is given in this hour of great spiritual darkness:

- that there be a liturgical feast in honour of God the Father;
- that children receive their First Communion at the use of reason, before evil can destroy them, as ordered by the Holy Pontiffs and by the Code of Canon Law; that they be educated to recite the Rosary and to Eucharistic Adoration.

Salvation will come, in a superabundant measure, because of the innocence of children who, by offering themselves to the Father, will make the sea of his Mercy spring forth from His Most tender Heart.

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