

1953

Retreat with the Bishops of the Province of the Three Venetias,
at Fietta, in the Villa of the Venetian Seminary,
15-21 May, 1953
Preacher, Father Federico da Baselga, Capuchins

Notes and jottings

(1) In April last year I sought shelter under the roof of the Sacred Heart at Montmartre in Paris, and May this year finds me here at the foot of the Grappa, Cardinal and Patriarch of Venice. What a transformation in all that surrounds me! I hardly know what to dwell on more: on how I rejoiced when they said to me . . . with all that follows, or on the sense of insufficiency which inspires feelings of humility and trust in the Lord. It is he who has really done all, and done it without my help, for I could never have imagined or desired such greatness. I am happy also because this meekness and humility do not go against the grain with me but come easily to my nature. Why should I be vain or proud of anything, my Lord? Is not 'my merit' all 'God's mercy'?

(2) It is interesting to note that Providence has brought me back to where I began to exercise my priestly vocation, that is to pastoral work. Now I am ministering directly to souls. To tell the truth, I have always believed that, for an ecclesiastic, diplomacy (so-called!) must be imbued with the pastoral spirit; otherwise it is of no use and makes a sacred mission look ridiculous. Now I am confronted with the Church's real interests, relating to her final purpose, which is to save souls and guide them to heaven. This is enough for me and I thank the Lord for it. I said so in St Mark's in Venice on 15 March, the day of my solemn entry. I desire and think of nothing else but to live and die for the souls entrusted to me. 'The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep . . . I am come that they may have life, and may have it more abundantly' (John 10: 11 and 10).

(3) I am beginning my direct ministry at an age-seventy-two years -when others end theirs. So, I find myself on the threshold of eternity. O Jesus, chief Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, the mystery of my life and death is in your hands, close to your heart. On the one hand I tremble at the approach of my last hour; on the other hand I trust in you and only look one day ahead. I feel I am in the same condition as St Aloysius Gonzaga, that is, I must go on with what I have to do, always striving after perfection but thinking still more of God's mercy.

In the few years I have still to live, I want to be a holy pastor, in the full sense of the word, like the Blessed Pius X, my predecessor, and the revered Cardinal Ferrari, and my own Mgr Radini Tedeschi while he lived, and as he would have remained had he lived longer. 'So help me God.'

(4) During this retreat I have been reading St Gregory and St Bernard, both of them concerned with the interior life of the pastor, which must not be affected by external material cares. My day must be one long prayer, is the breath of my life. I propose to recite all fifteen decades of the rosary every day, if possible in the chapel before the Blessed Sacrament, with the intention of recommending to Our Lord and to Our Lady the more urgent needs of my children in Venice and in the diocese: the clergy, young seminarians, consecrated virgins, public authorities and poor sinners.

I have already two painful problems here, amidst all the splendour of ecclesiastical state, and the veneration shown to me as Cardinal and Patriarch: the scantiness of my revenue and the throng of poor folk with their requests for employment and financial help.

As for the revenue, there is nothing to prevent me from improving it, both for my own sake and for my successors. But I prefer to bless the Lord for this poverty, which is rather humiliating and often embarrassing. It draws me closer to Jesus, who was poor, and to St Francis and, after all, I am sure I shall not die of hunger. O blessed poverty, which ensures for me a greater blessing on everything else and on what is most important in my pastoral work !

(6) My triumphal entry into Venice and these first two months' contact with my children make me realize the natural goodwill the Venetians feel for their Patriarch: they give me great encouragement. I do not want to set myself any new precepts to follow. I shall continue on my own way and according to my own temperament. Humility, simplicity, fidelity to the Gospel in word and works, with unfaltering gentleness, inexhaustible patience and fatherly and insatiable enthusiasm for the welfare of souls. I see that they like to listen to me and that my simple words go straight to their hearts. But I will take great care to prepare my sermons well, so that what I say may not be lacking in dignity and may be more and more edifying.

(7) My Episcopal household will gradually take shape. If the Holy Father grants me the Auxiliary Bishop that I need I shall be able to arrange everything for the good of all.

(8) Sometimes the thought of the short time still left to me tempts me to slacken my efforts. But with God's help I will not give in. `I neither fear to die nor refuse to live.' The Lord's will is still my peace.

The arc of my humble life, honoured far beyond my deserts by the Holy See, rose in my native village and now curves over the domes and pinnacles of St Mark's.

I want to add to my will the request that I should have a resting place reserved for me in the crypt of the basilica, near the tomb of the Evangelist, who has now become so dear and familiar to my soul and to my prayers. Mark, son to St Peter, and his disciple and interpreter.

1954

*Retreat at Torreglia in 1954, 6-12 June
Preacher, Mgr Landucci*

No notes.

I have made my will instead. For everything else I have returned to the conclusions drawn from last year's Exercises. In fact during these days I have found very helpful the meditation well divided among the twelve chapters of the second book of The Imitation of Jesus Christ: `Admonitions concerning the inner life'.

- (1) Of the inner life of the soul.
- (2) Of humble submission.

- (3) Of a good, peaceable man.
- (4) Of a pure mind and simple intention.
- (5) Of the consideration of one's self.
- (6) Of the joy of a good conscience.
- (7) Of the love of Jesus above all else.
- (8) Of close friendship with Jesus.
- (9) Of the lack of all comfort.
- (10) Of gratitude for the grace of God.
- (11) Of how few there are who love the Cross of Jesus.
- (12) Of the royal road of the holy Cross.

1955

*Retreat with the episcopate of the Three Venetias
Villa Immacolata of Torreglia (Padua)
from 20-25 May, 1955
Preacher, Father Riccardo Lombardi, S.J.*

Notes and resolutions

(1) I am seventy-four years old. The same age as St Lawrence Giustiniani, the first Patriarch of Venice, when he died (8 January, 1456). I am preparing the celebration of the fifth centenary of his blessed death. Is not this a good way of preparing for my own? A grave and salutary thought for me. 'I neither fear to die nor refuse to live.' But the life still left to me will be a joyful preparation for death. I accept death and await it with confidence-not in myself, for I am a poor sinner, but in the infinite mercy of the Lord to whom I owe all that I am, all that I have. 'I will sing of the mercies of God for ever.' 3

(2) The thought of death has kept me good, if melancholy, company since the day of my nomination as Cardinal and Patriarch of Venice. In seventeen months I have lost three dear sisters; two of them especially dear because they lived solely for the Lord and for me; for more than thirty years they looked after my house in tranquil expectation of spending their last years with their brother the Bishop. Losing them has been a great blow to me: it is my heart, not my reasoning mind, that has grieved. Although I never cease praying for them, I love to think of them in heaven praying for me, even more delighted than of old to help me and await me there. O Ancilla, O Maria, now reunited in the joyous radiance of eternity with the other two, Teresa and Enrica, so good and Godfearing all four of you, I remember you always, I mourn for you and at the same time I bless you. Now I clearly see that this separation too was decreed by the Lord so that, as I devote myself to the spiritual welfare of my Venetian children, I may seem to them to be like Melchisedech, with 'no father, no mother, no genealogy'.

My relations I must of course love in the Lord, all the more so because they are poor, and very worthy Christian folk everyone of them, and they have never given me anything but respect and joy, but I must always live apart from them, as an example to these good Venetian clergy who, for various reasons, some of them valid, have with

them too many members of their families, who are a considerable encumbrance to their pastoral ministry in life, in death, and after death.

(3) Of my pastoral life, my only life now, what can I say? I am content because it really gives me great joy. I do not need to use harsh measures to keep good order. Watchful kindness, patience and forbearance get one along much farther and more quickly than severity and the rod. I have no illusions or doubts about this.

But I am dismayed at the thought of not being able to look into everything, and more thoroughly-not being able to get everything done; I am always tempted to indulge my peaceable instincts which lead me to prefer a quiet life rather than risk making precarious moves. Cardinal Gusmini's principle: 'A Bishop should never give an order unless he is sure it will be obeyed' may perhaps accord too easily with my natural inclination to fear that the reaction may cause an increase rather than a reform of the evils that are to be corrected.

But the shepherd must above all be good, very good. On the other hand, although he does not, like the hireling, leave his flock to the wolf, he runs the risk of becoming useless and ineffective if he nods over his task. O Jesus, good shepherd, pour your own spirit into me, that these last years of my life may be a sacrifice and burnt offering for the souls of my beloved Venetians.

(4) I will renew once more, and now more earnestly than ever, my effort to attain a more intense interior and supernatural life. The passing of years makes everything in my life of prayer more enjoyable: Holy Mass, the Breviary, the rosary, the company of the Blessed Sacrament in my home. To be close to God from morning to night, and during the night also, always with God or the things of God, gives me constant joy, and helps me to be calm and patient at all times. But the work of my ministry, and of all that more or less concerns it, takes up too much of my time, almost stifling me and robbing me of the calm and tranquillity I need for my pious exercises or devotions. I shall lay more stress on these practices, at least on the rosary which I mean to have recited in common with all the members of my household. This will serve as a remembrance of this retreat of mine. The family rosary with my secretary, nuns, household staff and guests.

(5) These Exercises with Father Lombardi have been conducted by him from the point of view not of the individual Bishop but of the episcopate in general, and the Venetian episcopate in particular, confronted with the problems of the 'Better World'.

[. . .] Here also it is well to 'test everything: hold fast what is good' I must not lose myself in details and points of secondary importance. This Movement bears the seal of the approval and encouragement of the Holy Father, Pius XII, who initiated it. So we are on the right road. Here also are the seven lamps of sanctification: the theological and cardinal virtues. Ah my soul, your time on this earth is drawing to a close: your steps are turned towards the sunset. Go bravely forward: you will not be left without light, grace or joy. In the expectation of heaven even the Cross will be welcome and a source of strength.

(6) One of the first fruits of these reflections with Father Lombardi is my resolution to occupy myself more busily with religious schools of all kinds. For this I shall avail myself of the help of my Auxiliary Bishop who already presides over the diocesan religious education office.

1956

*Retreat in the seminary at S. Maria della Salute
(Venice), 11-15 June, 1956*

Brief notes

(1) My pilgrimage to Fatima prevented me from joining in the course of Exercises arranged for the excellent Bishops, my colleagues of the Venetian provinces, held at Torreglia and preached by Mgr Bosio, Archbishop of Chieti.

I have taken the opportunity to join my diocesan priests who are gathered here in the seminary for the Exercises preached by Mgr Pardini, Bishop of Jesi. He is an excellent preacher of the Exercises to the clergy.

But being with my dear priests and sharing their perplexities has robbed me of the tranquillity I needed in order to think of myself. So another time I shall endeavour to visit my priests and stay with them at their various courses or wherever they may be, and more at my leisure. But for my retreats I shall stay with the Bishops, to attend exclusively to my own soul.

(2) With regard to practical proposals for the year I have confirmed my renewed resolution to achieve what has been the object of so many of my efforts, so frequently repeated, to improve my spiritual life: the perfection of mildness, patience and charity in my prayers as a priest and in my work for souls and for Holy Church, day by day. And this at all costs, at the risk of seeming to be and being considered a person of little worth, with little to give.

(3) This sense of my own insufficiency, which is always with me and preserves me from vanity, is a great gift from the Lord: it keeps me simple and saves me from making a fool of myself.

I would not mind being thought a fool if this could help people to understand what I firmly believe and shall assert as long as I live, that the Gospel teaching is unalterable, and that in the Gospel Jesus teaches us to be gentle and humble; naturally this is not the same thing as being weak and easy-going. Everything that smacks of pretentiousness and self-assertion is only selfishness and comes to nought.

(4) I am convinced that it is not right for me to make the Exercises together with my priests. I have to listen to the requests of every one of them, and so I have no time or tranquillity left to look after my own spiritual needs. And yet I should so much like to preach the Exercises myself, but with time for calm and long preparation, 'proximate and remote'.

The memory of Fatima and of the joy I felt there makes me feel an even greater veneration for the Lord's command 'to preach the good news to the poor and to comfort the broken-hearted'.

1957

*Retreat with the episcopate of the Province of the
Three Venetias, 2-7 June, 1957, at Torreglia
Preacher, Mgr van Lierde, Sacristan to His Holiness*

Personal notes

(1) "Give me more light as evening falls." O Lord, we are now in the evening of our life. I am in my seventy-sixth year. Life is a great gift from our heavenly Father. Three-quarters of my contemporaries have passed over to the far shore. So I too must always be ready for the great moment. The thought of death does not alarm me. Now one of my five brothers also has gone before me, and he was the youngest but one, my beloved Giovanni. Ah, what a good life and what a fine death! My health is excellent and still robust, but I cannot count on it. I want to hold myself ready to reply adsum at any, even the most unexpected moment.

(2) Old age, likewise a great gift of the Lord's, must be for me a source of tranquil inner joy, and a reason for trusting day by day in the Lord himself, to whom I am now turned as a child turns to his father's open arms.

(3) My poor life, now such a long one, has unwound itself as easily as a ball of string, under the sign of simplicity and purity. It costs me nothing to acknowledge and repeat that I am nothing and worth precisely nothing.

The Lord caused me to be born of poor folk, and he has seen to all my needs. I have left it to him. As a young priest I was struck by the motto Oboedientia et Pax of Cesare Baronius, who used to say it as he bowed his head to kiss the foot of St Peter's statue-and I have left everything to God and have allowed myself to be led in perfect obedience to the plans of Providence. Truly, 'the will of God is my peace'. And my hope is all in the mercy of God, who wanted me to be his priest and minister.

He has been too kind about my 'countless sins, offences and negligences' and he still keeps me full of life and vigour.

(4) I think the Lord Jesus has in store for me, before I die, for my complete mortification and purification and in order to admit me to his everlasting joy, some great suffering and affliction of body and spirit. Well, I accept everything and with all my heart, if it is for his glory and the good of my soul and for the souls of my dear spiritual children. I fear my weakness in bearing pain; I implore him to help me, for I have little faith in myself, but complete faith in the Lord Jesus. 'The whiterobed army of martyrs praise you.'

(5) There are two gates to paradise: innocence and penance. Which of us, poor frail creatures, can expect to find the first of these wide open? But we may be sure of the other: Jesus passed through it, bearing his Cross in atonement for our sins, and he invites us to follow him. But following him means doing penance, letting oneself be scourged, and scourging oneself a little too.

My Jesus, amidst the many joys of my episcopal ministry there are also continual opportunities for mortification. I welcome them. Sometimes they hurt my pride a little, but I rejoice at this suffering and repeat before God: 'It is good for me to be humiliated.' St Augustine's great saying is always in my mind and comforts me.

1958

*Retreat at [Col Draga di) Possagno, House of the
Sacred Heart, with the Cavanis Fathers*

*22-26 September, 1958. The preacher, invited by me, was Mgr Aurelio Signora,
Archbishop, 'Prelate of Pompei*

(1) This is a most pleasant situation, high up on the slopes of the Grappa. I was welcomed by these excellent Fathers of the Istituto Cavanis. Father Pellegrino Bolzonello, the Superior, most friendly and courteous. With me are the pro-Vicar, Mgr Gottardi, Mgr Capovilla and the staff of the Curia and several parish priests. Among the Canons, Mgr Vecchi, Mgr Spavento, etc. Many of my young priests too. Mgr Signora is good and preaches well. His voice was a little difficult for me, as I had to listen from where I was placed at the side, but his doctrine was excellent, well expressed and presented with obviously profound and sincere conviction. There were also some priests from Vittorio Veneto. Altogether a serious and worthy group.

(2) Alas! I found, and for the second time, that I need a 'lonely place' to 'rest a while. To please those present I also had to speak to them. The first evening: the office of the priesthood; the second: the mind of a priest; the third: the five points from my talk at Faenza; the fourth: the priest's heart, character and conversation, strongly emphasizing meekness and humility, character and conversation, with references to courtesy and to preaching.

No, this will not do. For the Exercises I must be alone, free from curial business and in silence and tranquility, occupied only with myself and my own soul.

(3) My advanced age means that I should now be much more chary of accepting engagements to preach outside my own diocese. I have to write everything down first, and this is a great effort, besides the constant humiliation of feeling my own insufficiency. May the Lord help me and forgive me.