

## **THE STORY OF THE CONCEPTIONIST SISTERS AND THE HISTORY OF THE FEMALE SCHOOL**

The Congregation of the Worker Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, usually named “Conceptionists”, was born from a divine inspiration generously accepted by Francesco Antonio Marcucci in September 1738 and realised, as he writes “after many prayers, pains and hard works, in the town of Ascoli Piceno on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1744, on the day dedicated to our Immaculate Lady”.

The bishop, Mons. Tommaso Marana, who appreciated the talents and the spirit of the young Francesco Antonio, gave the permission for the foundation and the total trust on the government of it.

The community life of the first four sisters, Maria Tecla Relucenti, Maria Giacomina Aloisi, Maria Dionisia Paci and Maria Caterina Silvestri, started in poverty.

No one of them had brought the dowry and Marcucci could not dispose of his family properties. Marcucci knew the administrative models of the historical period and with the help of his father, the lawyer Leopoldo, made a surprising lending and purchases movement, so that he could constitute a fund for the Congregation and in a few years he gave it all the structures it needed for the community life, for the apostolic activity and for the decorum of the Church.

Marcucci cured in a particular way the human and spiritual formation of the members of his Congregation, with real humility, total devotion and faith in God and in His Immaculate Mother.

To attend this big work, during the first three years of the Foundation, he renounced to all the pastoral and preaching obligations, even if they could give a contribution to give economical support to the Congregation making people know it.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 1747 he opened in the Monastery the Academy of Immaculate Conception, structured as a small university: together with the religious women, also lay women could attend the courses, if they were disposed to follow the program of study and the finality of the Academy, which was oriented to the cultural and spiritual formation of the members, on the examples of the virtuous women of the past, and to believe and defend the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

The Academy reached quickly the purpose of the Founder: also the worker sisters, who were dedicated to attend the manual works, were introduced to study and lecture, overcoming the typical strong social class discriminations of that historical period.

Three months after the foundation, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1745, was opened the “Sacred School of Doctrine and Works” for the poor and rich girls of the town.

The first students received in the school were 24, twelve for each one of the two teachers ready to start, even if the girls asking to enter in the school were many more.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 1745 Mother Tecla started with the first catechistic lesson to the young women, which gave amazement and wonder, as reported on the “Memories of the Congregation”: “It seemed a new and almost prodigious thing to listen to religious women who were teaching and explaining the Christian Doctrine, and urge strongly everybody to understand.”

In the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 1749, the Founder opened the School for Intellectual and Practical Education of young women and prepared for it an accurate program.

The School became a catechistic centre not only directed to the students but also to the women of every age and social class and condition.

On 1758 was started the 10 days preparation to help small groups of young girls who were going to receive the Eucharistic Sacrament. From the apposite registration book it is possible

to see the number of girls who attended this particular lessons during the period that goes from 1758 to 1770 as reported:

1758: 2 – 1759: 3 – 1760: 2 – 1761: 3 – 1762: 3 – 1763: 3 – 1764: 1 – 1765: 3 – 1766: 4 – 1767: 7 – 1768: 8 – 1769: 5 - 1770: 5.

The method proposed by Marcucci for the education of the young girls is an indefatigable research to find the best way to help the students to understand and grow in a climate of joy, serenity and love.

To a teacher he judged too severe in the method of teaching he recommended: “The teacher must try to go over one thousand ways, give one thousand stimulus, use one thousand words, think one thousand means, and using a clear and various communicative adapt, choose, repeat and use every way to give an impression even to stones”.

Some years later from Rome he wrote to Sister Maria Emanuela Capozzi: “The tender plaints must be cultivated with a gentle, patient and pleasant hand. The hard hands break them and loose time. The spirit of the Congregations is founded on the sweet charity. The persons who think differently don’t understand the right sense. It is better to be a girl with the girls to take them to God and make their spirit happy and docile.”

The school founded from Marcucci was the first female school opened in Ascoli for girls and women from every social class and age. It was an opportunity for women to have a cultural and spiritual elevation to bear positively upon society to heal it and make it get better with the inspiration of the Immaculate Virgin Mary and her powerful intercession.

It is easy to understand how many objections, envies and jealousies this project made and in the same time the consolation and enthusiastic reaction was coming from this high proposal.

The Institute created by Marcucci was positively inserted in the social and religious tissue of the town growing with the patient work of the founder. and the generous correspondence of the Worker Sisters who were appreciated for the example given from their life and the great social service always more qualified they offered.

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## **THE CONGREGATION AFTER THE DEATH OF THE FOUNDER**

When Marcucci died, in 1798, the Congregation counted fifteen members with ten Sisters; during his life twelve Sisters had died.

When in the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 1801 the Cardinal Archetti, bishop of Ascoli, came back after the Napoleonic tempest, he visited the Monastery and he was pleased for its good progress and for the optimal plan given from the Founder.

But a very hard moment was coming to start for the Congregation. In fact on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1810 the French government started the suppression of the religious congregations. The French government ordered to religious people to leave the religious dress, inside and outside the monastery. The Worker Sisters, guided by the Superior Mother Maria Santina Antonini, obeyed with spirit of faith and they dressed the secular dress leaving the religious dress under it.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1811 all the religious of the town were forced to leave the monasteries where they lived, except the ones of the School founded by Marcucci where the young women coming from the closed monasteries were received.

Four years later also the Worker Sisters were forced to leave their residence to give it to the Napoleonic army which stayed in the Monastery.

The religious women went to live in private houses they took for rent, divided in little groups formed by three or four elements. They continued their educational work from those houses, as written by Luigi Torresi, the didactic director of the school.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1822, the day dedicated to the Annunciation, the seven Sisters remained were allowed to go back in the Monastery, they could celebrate with joy and gratitude the restore of it and wear the religious dress of Immaculate Conception: it was the first Monastery open in town.

The Sisters continued their educative mission, cleaned the rooms of the Monastery and made the chorus: their number arrived to 26 sisters.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1844 they celebrated the centenary of the Foundation with an enthusiastic spirit and a big participation of people.

After ten years, in the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1854, the Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of Immaculate Conception: the Worker Sisters organized splendid celebrations with an extraordinary presence of people.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 1858, during the journey in the Papal State, the Pope Pius the Ninth visited Ascoli and the Monastery dedicated to the Immaculate Conception 110 years before the proclamation of the dogma.

In the room where all the religious women of the town were admitted to kiss the feet, a picture and a plate have been posed to remind the visit of the Pope.

The constitution of Italian Kingdom between 1860 and 1861 left many problems open, like completing the national unit, the regulation of relations between State and Church, the situation of poverty of the nation, the public deficit and the illiterate people.

With a decree of the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1860 the king Vittorio Emanuele II ordered the suppression of all the religious congregations to take their properties.

In the region of Marche only three orders were exempted because they were dedicated to give charity and social services: between these the congregation of the Worker Sisters.

The grace was obtained by the citizens of Ascoli, as written by Torresi, who were responsible of the public things, and to thank for the long and important services given by the school of the Worker Sisters of Ascoli Piceno, asked and obtained a Royal Decree which saved the Congregation from the general suppression.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 1865, because of the imminent invasion of Asiatic cholera, the School Inspector ordered the immediate closure of the school which was closed with a general unhappiness.

The following year the king Vittorio Emanuele II enforced the suppressing law by the realisation of a general census of all the monasteries with the order of letting remain only the religious women professed before 1860. At that date the Worker Sisters were only twelve.

On 1867 the school was re-opened and it reached the number of one hundred students which increased in the following years.

To be prepared to answer correctly to the exigencies of the govern programs, the Sisters called Miss Teresa Gorzegno, a patented teacher who came from Turin. For forty years she was teacher and Director of the school distinguishing her work for competence and ability which were recognised to her from the various school authorities of the town. She died in the institute on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1914.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 1866 arrived the order of suppression without liquidation of pension and on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1867, in less than two hours, all the properties of the Congregation were taken.

Only after three years, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 1869, the Sisters obtained the minimum pension.

On 1892 the Religion Fund of Rome ordered to concentrate all the religious women of the town in some monasteries and to leave some buildings to public destinations.

The result of the census was that the Worker Sisters were only five, all old and ill, and so the Internal Revenue Office proposed to order them to leave the monastery.

The Prefect Mother Agnese Savini, who directed the community for forty-five years, fought with intelligence and with a big trust in God and in the Immaculate Conception against these difficulties. She Wrote several letters to the competent authorities to save the rights of the Congregation and she succeeded in this work.

As it happened in the past also in this situation the service of public instruction offered by the Sisters saved them from the authority decision to order them to leave the monastery: and so they obtained that a part of the building would be reserved to the Sisters, the school and the personnel.

The Sisters continued with the cure of the school which was honoured by the presence of girls coming from every social class, with general satisfaction of their parents and of the competent authorities.

The relation made on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 1899 by the Kingdom School Inspector, the Cavalier Mariani, and taken by the School Provider Professor Passamonti, tells that the number of students was 144, the classrooms were suitable and well furnished, there were good spaces for recreation and there were very good habits of order and cleaning. Programs and books were the same ones used for the public schools. Because of the free frequency to the school, it supported the Town Council which spared an expense amounting to 2.000 lire.

In the book titled "Instruction of the Province of Ascoli Piceno", edited in 1899, the author Joseph Castelli reports the following phrase of the Professor Passamonti: "Gratitude to you, meritorious Worker Sisters, modest and humble like the violet which although hide, expands around its sweet scent to delight the soul of the persons who walk near to it."

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 1895 the new Superior Mother Cristina Pilotti prepared a cause against the State Property and the Religion Fund helped by the intelligent Sister M. Serafina Saladini and the two lawyers Giuseppe Maria Mazzocchi and Corso Donati; six years later there was the restitution of a part of the Congregation's properties.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 1902 there was the complete realisation of the hydraulic plant in the kitchen, refectory, cloister, bathrooms and all the other parts which needed it.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1903 the part of the building where the Founder lived was cleaned out: it had been occupied for 29 years by the Town Council and used for the town nursery school. After these difficulties the Congregation revived again with the generous work of the survivors who, inspired by the charisma of the Founder, used every mean to restore the building and the church and re-opened the college.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 1914 in the dangers of the imminent First World War the Superior Mother Teresa Taliani opened the first filial house in Cupramarittima and in the Mother House of Ascoli she opened the Superior School of Religion.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1915 the same Superior, who strongly desired to introduce the Canonisation Cause of Marcucci, obtained the permission to remove his body buried in the church dedicated to the Immaculate Conception; she also gave to the Ecclesiastical Arcangelo Rossi Brunori the responsibility of write a biography which was strongly appreciated and to write a prayer to the Saint Trinity to ask for the grace to declare him blessed.

On the following years the Congregation registered a big increase of members and of new communities.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1929 was elected first General Superior Mother Maria Pia Raffo (1880-1960); in that period the "Rule" of the Founder was brought up to date to the new Canon Right Code and it was definitively approved on 1941.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 1929 the Pope Pius the XI answered positively to the request of Mother Maria Pia Raffo to admit in the school also the little boys younger than twelve years.

The General Chapter of 1981 authorised to receive in the school the students of every order and degree.

On 1943, with the election of Sister M. Caterina Pavoni (1901-1975) as General Superior Mother, the Congregation counted 120 sisters, 25 of them obtained the diploma of teacher, 2 of them were graduated, and some of them were students in superior institutes; they were divided in 18 communities positioned in various little towns of the Province, moreover four of them were in Rome.

In Ascoli Piceno there were a Female Secondary School largely appreciated by the local school authorities, a Primary School on the same level with the public school which counted five classes, a numerous number of students in the college connected to the secondary school which had a very good reputation and a large prestige; a school and orphanage in Fasano (BA); nursery schools and laboratories elsewhere, with a school population of about two thousands students.

On 1949 the General Curia and the Novice Institute were transferred in Rome, in two different communities.

Mother Bernardetta Cerolini, General Superior Mother from 1957 to 1969, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1963 opened in Ascoli Piceno the Diocese Process to declare blessed Mons. Marcucci which was concluded on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1968. In the same period she started the work for the revision and the updating of the "Rules" .

Mother Petronilla Olori, who was the General Superior from 1969 to 1981 realized a wish fed for years by the Congregation: on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1978 the first Missionary Community in Brazil, in Capita Leonidas Marques in the State of Paraná.

On 1981 the Congregation counted 170 members and the eighth General Chapter elected Mother Giacinta Beltrami as General Superior, who was charged until 1993.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1989 she opened the Missionary Community in Manila, in Philippines. Mother Roberta Torquati succeeded to her and she worked for the realization of considerable celebrations, some of them for the anniversary of 250 years of the Foundation (1994), some for the anniversary of 200 years from the death of the Founder (1998) and for the anniversary of 300 years from the birth of Mother Tecla Relucenti (1704-2004).

In the various initiatives must be mentioned the opening of two important schools: the Communication High School in Ascoli Piceno, a Primary School in San Benedetto del Tronto and the publication of several works of the Founder.

On 2001 all the Italian schools of the Congregation obtained the Decree of private school officially recognized by the State.

The Congregation has an international expression: in fact it is composed by 120 Italian religious women, 20 Brazilian ones, 9 Philippine ones, and also 2 religious women coming from Madagascar.

The last mission has been opened in Madagascar on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2003 in Morarano Chrome where on September 2005 started the activity of the nursery school .

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2003, during the XII General Chapter of the Congregation, in the Mother House of Ascoli Piceno, Mother Virgilia Trasatti has been elected as General Superior.