

The *Collegio Alberoni* Yesterday and Today

by Alberto Vernaschi, C.M.
Province of Rome

“The factory of cardinals”: someone called the *Collegio Alberoni* this a few years ago, when the Diocese of Piacenza was discovered to have given the Church a number of cardinals, the majority of whom had completed their high school, philosophy and theology in this well-known institution.¹ What has just been pointed out is certainly a clear and significant piece of data in the history of the *Collegio Alberoni*, even if it was not founded with the intent of furnishing cardinals to the Church, but rather “good pastors and confessors.”

The Project of a Cardinal and a Priest of the Mission

The official document of foundation for the *Collegio Alberoni* is the bull *Clericalem vitam elegantibus* of Pope Clement XII dated July 13, 1732. But the merit for the initiative for foundation goes to a cardinal native to Piacenza, Giulio Alberoni (May 21, 1664-June 26, 1752).²

At the death of Cardinal Collicola at the end of 1730, the Pope had nominated Alberoni as Administrator and Commendatory of the hospital of S. Lazzaro in Piacenza. The institution was completely decayed. During the years of his retirement in Rome after being expelled from Spain in 1718, Alberoni had come into sufficient contact with the Priests of the Mission and, in particular, the Visitor of the Roman Province of the Congregation of the Mission, Fr. Bernardo della Torre. Out of love for his native city,

¹ Cardinals from Piacenza who studied at the *Collegio Alberoni* include: Antonio Samoré (+1982), Silvio Oddi (living), Opilio Rossi (living), Agostino Casaroli (+1998), and Luigi Poggi (living). The most famous of all is certainly Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, Secretary of State for many years to John Paul II. To the list of cardinals one can add a rich list of bishops.

² We do not repeat here, even in summary, the biographical data of Cardinal Alberoni. Among the numerous studies about this data, we cite the monumental work edited by Giovanni Felice Rossi, *Cento Studi sul Cardinale Alberoni con altri studi di specialisti internazionali*, 4 vv., Piacenza 1978. This work concerns not only the person of Cardinal Alberoni but the history of the *Collegio Alberoni* in its various aspects. We also cite Pietro Castagnoli, *Il Cardinale Giulio Alberoni*, 3 vv., Piacenza 1929-1932; G. F. Rossi, *Il Cardinale Alberoni e i duecento anni di vita del suo Collegio*, Piacenza 1957; F. Arisi and L. Mezzadri, *Arte e storia nel Collegio Alberoni di Piacenza*, a richly illustrated volume of 446 pages, Piacenza 1990. The first pages are dedicated by L. Mezzadri to Cardinal Giulio Alberoni as a person. The realization of such a work which constitutes as well the catalogue of the *Galleria Alberoni* [the collection of art found at the *Collegio Alberoni*] –was made possible by a grant from the Industria Cementi Giovanni Rossi of Piacenza, under the presidency of the engineer Aldo Aonzo. For the history of Cardinal Alberoni and the Collegio di S. Lazzaro it is useful to read the issues of the *Bolletino della “Associazione Alberoniana.”* Since 1979, 20 *Bulletin*’s have been published which carry, as well as some papers, the life of the College.

which he had not seen since 1706, Alberoni took to heart the task he received from the Pope, and, with the help of Fr. della Torre,³ who was also an architect, conceived the grandiose project of transforming the hospital into a college for the formation of the clergy. For its running, teaching and even the administration of its goods the founder wished that it all be given *in perpetuo* to the Priests of the Mission of St. Vincent de Paul, called to the vocation of the evangelization of the poor and the formation of the clergy. To this end he obtained from Pope Clement XII the aforementioned bull *Clericalem vitam eligentibus*.

It is important to recognize that Alberoni would not have conceived of and brought to completion his College had he not had great esteem for priestly life and were he not convinced of the need of the Church for “good pastors and confessors.” He was concerned not only with constructing it, but with giving it enough financial support to make access to it possible for so many young men who, though having the necessary intellectual and moral qualities to become ministers of God, did not have at their disposal the corresponding economic means, and thus of guaranteeing them a formation that had solidity and continuity.⁴

The work began immediately. It was nearly completed when Alberoni was nominated as Papal Legate in the Italian region of Romagna. This was a task which he accomplished with great energy. It was Prospero Lambertini, elected as Pope in 1740, taking the name Benedict XIV, who gave Alberoni the legation of Bologna in a very delicate moment of European history. At the same time, the Cardinal continued to concern himself with his *Collegio di San Lazzaro*, [the name he gave to the *Collegio Alberoni*] which was almost ready in 1746. In the war, however, between the French-Spanish and the Austrians, the building was mined and almost completely blown into the air. Others would have given up the task of rebuilding what had been destroyed—but not Alberoni. He went back to work. He had the building reconstructed, refurnished, and he opened it to the first group of 18 young men on November 28, 1751.⁵ He would have wished to follow for much longer the life of the institution he created. Instead, he died on June 26 of the following year in his palace in the city, and he named the College his sole heir.⁶

³ There is also a passage in a letter of Alberoni to della Torre in which he says to him: “You know that you have been the sole helper at my side” (cf. G. F. Rossi, *Cento studi* III, 9-20).

⁴ Cf. The various documents reported in the *Tavole di fondazione del Collegio Alberoni*.

⁵ The date of 1751 is that which is found in the *Catalogus provinciarum, domorum ac personarum* of the Congregation of the Mission when it speaks of the *Collegio Alberoni* of Piacenza. But the confreres had already begun taking care of the College, given the Papal bull of 1732.

⁶ The endowment of the College, already a significant sum at the death of the founder, grew notably during the first century of administration by the confreres, to whom the documents of foundation gave control of everything, both the running of the college and the teaching of the college, as well as its endowment. In 1867 the Italian government decreed the transformation of the Alberonian endowment into a lay-run Pious Work directed by a council, from which the missionaries were completely excluded. Since 1935, two missionaries, named by the Procurator General of the Congregation, have been part of the council of the Pious Work. Since January 29, 1993, by decree of the President of the Region of Emilia-Romagna, the

The formation of generations of good priests

According to the will of the founder, his College should welcome poor clerics, sons of “honest people, ... sound of mind and of excellent manners” to make them “the best priests.” As L. Mezzadri pithily points out, “the Alberonian formation had as its objectives a ‘sound education’ and a ‘virtuous direction’ through which the students were to demonstrate docility, realistic capacity to find the good in everything, respect for the goods of the College, detachment from lay people, and a capacity to cast off the spirit of the world to put on that of Christ.”⁷

St. Vincent had a lofty idea of the identity and mission of priests: “Priests are called to the holiest mystery there is on earth, in which they must exercise the two great virtues of Jesus Christ: obedience toward the Eternal Father and love toward men.”⁸ Faithful to the task left to them by their founder, the Priests of the Mission assigned to formation work in the *Collegio Alberoni* had to strive to prepare seminarians in just this manner: immersed in the mysteries of God but in solidarity with men.

Other than the superior, the professors, the directors and the procurator (treasurer), there were also to be at the *Collegio Alberoni* other confreres dedicated to preaching missions in the diocese. The house was thus in full conformity with Vincentian tradition. In fact, Vincent himself, when accepting the direction of seminaries, asked that there would also be at least two confreres assigned there for giving missions, as it appears in the letter of July 20, 1650, that Vincent wrote to the Bishop of Périgueux: “...two workers are not enough for a foundation that conforms to your wishes and to the aims of our Institute. You are thinking of a seminary, and we have the obligation to preach missions; our principal purpose is the instruction of country folk; and the service we give to the ecclesiastical state is only an accessory to this ... Thus ...since you have asked for some missionaries, it is convenient that you have at least four of them, so that they can thus fulfill both the one and the other function.”⁹

Pious Work Alberoni has become a moral entity of private right and the whole council (3 lay people and two missionaries) is named by the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, having heard the Bishop of Piacenza. It is in this way that one may say that the Congregation is once again responsible for the administration of the goods of the college.

⁷ “Il Collegio Alberoni (1752-1989). Profilo storico [Historical Profile]” in *Arte e Storia nel Collegio Alberoni di Piacenza*, p. 32. To Fr. Luigi Mezzadri one recognizes an important contribution for the history of the College itself under the aspect of priestly formation given by it: *Il Collegio Alberoni di Piacenza (1732-1815) Contributo alla storia della formazione sacerdotale [Contribution to the History of Priestly Formation]*, Roma 1971.

⁸ SV VI, 393.

⁹ SV IV, 42-44. Very precise, and programmatic as well, is the expression that one finds in SV II, 460 (letter of May 13, 1641, to Coding in Rome): “... it is not suitable that we accept any foundation that does not give us the possibility of having at least two priests assigned to the missions; because otherwise our purpose of assisting the poor people would vanish, *quod absit*.” Many parishes of the Diocese of Piacenza

The formation program lasted nine years and was very serious, above all on the level of spiritual preparation; there was nothing extraordinary or singular in this, but it had a strong ascetic character. Scholastic life was also serious; first the students took up philosophy, mathematics and physics, then dogmatic theology, and finally moral theology and Canon Law. Faithful to their tradition, the professors were open to research and to new trends. In particular, the relationship between science and faith was never seen as being in conflict, but in harmony: the program did not fall to fideism nor did it burn incense to rationalism. The teaching methodology favored deepening of knowledge and assimilation of it. Finally, the formation program was serious concerning everything regarding pastoral preparation: the attached parish of San Lazzaro was to function as a stage for the exercises of the students. This aspect was also in line with the indications of St. Vincent, who expressed himself thusly: “Experience has helped us come to know that where there is a seminary it is good that there also be a parish where the seminarians can work, and learn better the works of ministry through practice rather than theory.”¹⁰ According to the various stages of formation, the students were subdivided in three groups, each group assigned a Priest of the Mission as its director.

With this program as a foundation, the *Collegio Alberoni* has surpassed the test of centuries. All its tradition demonstrates how it has been a place of serious human, spiritual, doctrinal, and pastoral formation for generations of priests who have served, not only the Diocese of Piacenza, but also the universal Church. To the cardinals and bishops already mentioned, and to other priests called to the service of the Apostolic See, we must also add those many students of the *Collegio Alberoni* who entered the Congregation of the Mission and other missionary institutes.

Even with the adaptations that have come about because of changing times, the *Collegio Alberoni* remains faithful to its program as a seminary today. Conserving its character as an institute which one enters through a *conkursus*, since 1966 it began, in practice, to welcome almost all the seminarians of the Diocese of Piacenza (since 1992 Piacenza-Bobbio), for the course of studies in philosophy and theology, functioning as the sole major seminary of the diocese. Students of other dioceses of Italy, benefitting from the endowment of the *Collegio Alberoni*, now frequent the College in accord with the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education.¹¹ Studies are now distributed over a six-year period. The Theological School, affiliated with the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas of Rome, has students of various religious communities, as well as lay students. At the end of the course of studies, the students may be awarded the academic degree “Bachelor in Theology,” which requires the writing of a

were able to derive great profit from the free preaching of missions to the people by Priests of the Mission present in the *Collegio Alberoni* until 1986.

¹⁰ SV VII, 253-254 (letter of St. Vincent of September 6, 1658, to Edmund Jolly in Rome).

¹¹ There are students from the dioceses of Fidenza, Parma, Pontremoli, Mazara del Vallo (Trapani), Piazza Armerina (Enna), and Aquila. The endowment of the *Collegio Alberoni* has also been extended to some students who come from other countries.

thesis and the passing of an examination. Following the reforms of 1966, not only the Priests of the Mission teach in the *Collegio Alberoni*, but also diocesan priests of Piacenza-Bobbio and of religious institutes. Some courses are taught by lay people.

Today's formation program at the *Collegio Alberoni* is fixed in the "Formative Project" and is laid out in the "Rules," two texts prepared during the years 1991-1993 following the indications of various ecclesial documents and approved by the Bishop of Piacenza-Bobbio on December 8, 1993. As a seminary, that is, as a community that the Church has desired as a place of welcome, as a proving ground, and as a place where priestly vocations can mature, the *Collegio Alberoni* strives to "assure an experience of faith that is rich and organically connected with the various phases of the growth of a [candidate's] personality in a climate of intense relationship with Jesus, of demanding community life, and of serious theological preparation." Thus, the "Formative Project" seeks to create conditions and put into motion all the parts of the program that will form those who, through the sacrament of Orders, are called to be "a living image of Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church."¹² In line with the wishes of Cardinal Alberoni, the ideal of giving the Church true pastors, animated by a "pastoral charity" that carries them to give themselves without reserve to their brothers, remains alive. The criteria of foundation on which the "Formative Project" is nourished are: "configuration to Christ, Master, Priest, Pastor, and Head," "ecclesial communion," the "educating community," the "centrality of the personhood of the one called," "attention to the situation of those called today, to the directives of the Magisterium and to the tradition of the *Collegio Alberoni*," and the constant "reference to Mary."

A culturally open and productive environment

During the course of its history, the *Collegio Alberoni* has made a notable contribution to the growth of culture. With reason Maurizio Migliavacca, President of the [civil] provincial administration of Piacenza, on the occasion of the exhibition "The knowledge of the Cardinal" of 1993, wrote: "The *Collegio Alberoni* represents, for the people of Piacenza, one of the greatest and most important institutions of the city. The *Collegio Alberoni* has always been a center of culture since its inception; today is for our city an occasion to increase and value anew its own cultural and artistic heritage."¹³ On the same occasion, Gian Carlo Mazzocchi, President of the Fondazione della Cassa di Risparmio di Piacenza e Vigevano [a bank], spoke of the *Collegio Alberoni* as a place given to the formation of the clergy but, because of the multifaceted inclinations of its founder, has become a center of production and dissemination of culture in the broad sense, encyclopedic and humanistic. Here arts and sciences, libraries and collections, theology and scientific instruments have found a tree on which to roost.¹⁴

¹² Thus reads the "Formative Project," citing n. 280 of the Diocesan Synod of Piacenza-Bobbio that, in turn, used expressions from the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* of John Paul II.

¹³ C. Francou, *La scienza del cardinale*, p. 9.

The *Collegio Alberoni* has certainly made a significant contribution to the growth of philosophical and theological thought. The instruments of this have especially been the school and the journal *Divus Thomas*.¹⁵ The complete and praiseworthy book collection that was established and is maintained inside the structure of an artistic library is linked to both of these as well.¹⁶

Another cultural contribution worthy of note is the conservation and the growth of a rich collection of art, which, going back to the very valuable fundamental nucleus of its Cardinal founder, includes masterpieces such as the *Ecce Homo* of Antonelli of Messina, the *Madonna alla fonte* and *Bicchiere con fiori* of Jan Provost, 18 tapestries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the marriage of Priamo, a series about Enea and Dido, a series on Alexander the Great), etc.

We should also remember the systematic and vast (rather than occasional and sporadic) attention to the area of science. In the atmosphere that formed generations of priests at the *Collegio Alberoni* well known scholars in the field of the physical and natural sciences knew how to initiate their students into love for scientific investigation; in its laboratories developed for the experimental observation of nature and the proof of its laws, as is documented by the collections of minerals and fossils, the zoological chamber, the meteorologic, astronomical, and seismic observatories; in it came together and are conserved texts that can be considered milestones of scientific thought.¹⁷

A fruitful union

The Congregation of the Mission has always held close to its heart the institution founded by Cardinal Alberoni, it believed it to be part of the Congregation, and has

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7.

¹⁵ The journal *Divus Thomas* first appeared on March 7, 1880, and immediately became an important point of cultural reference; it had periods of particular intensity and was at the center of vivacious philosophical and theological debates. Since 1992, the running of this journal has been ceded over to the publisher *Studio Domenicano* of Bologna.

¹⁶ The library, which certainly constitutes the most meaningful area of the *Collegio Alberoni*, has in various nooks and crannies numerous works from the sixteenth century, rare and valuable books, among which those of Carlo Francesco Berta (Fra' Zaccaria). Other than the texts which he had collected, he left to the *Collegio Alberoni* his own "Erbario" [listing of herbs] manuscript in color, his "Collectio Plantarum," [collection of plants], and his "Hortus siccus" [dried garden].

¹⁷ In recent times, the scientific heritage of the *Collegio Alberoni* has been evaluated and brought to the knowledge of scholars and everyone above all through two exhibitions accompanied by appropriate publications edited by C. Francou. The first of September-November 1993 (that saw a notable number of visitors and interested too the mass media), is documented in the volume *La scienza del cardinale* (Reggio Emilia, Edizioni Diabasis, 1993); the second, in 1997, by the volume *Tra scienza e fede. Pensiero scientifico e credo religioso attraverso i volumi della biblioteca del Collegio Alberoni* (Piacenza, Galleria Braga, 1996)

dedicated particular attention to it in every era. It would be a long task to list the names of superiors, professors, educators, and scholars who spent their lives for the institution. We are going to recall some of them¹⁸ without taking anything away from the merit of so many others. In the beginning, the philosopher, expert in physics, and theologian Francesco Grassi (1715-1773) and his assistant Gian Domenico Cravosio (1725-1776), who later became professor of physics at the University of Parma, stand out. To Antonio Mantenga (1759-1811), professor of physics and mathematics, we owe the foundation of the meteorological observatory (1802), one of the oldest both in and outside Italy. After a brief period when the confreres were sent away from the *Collegio Alberoni*, Carlo Saverio De Petris (1747-1836) was sent to run the College. His was a personality of the highest value; he was venerated as a saint, and he brought the life of the *Collegio Alberoni* to its original form. Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the mathematician, astronomer and physics professor Giovanni Battista Manzi shines forth. He was also the superior of the *Collegio Alberoni* from 1881 until 1904, and to him we owe the construction of its own site for the astronomical observatory. Near his time we find the two professors who gave origin to the journal *Divus Thomas*: Giovanni Battista Tornatore (1820-1896), theologian and sought-after spiritual director, collaborator with Rosa Gattorno in founding the Daughters of St. Anne; Alberto Barberis (1847-1896), professor of natural history, acute philosopher, and well-versed in several languages.

In the first half of the 20th century Alcide Marina (1887-1950) distinguished himself, becoming, first, Visitor of the Roman Province, and then Archbishop and Apostolic Delegate, initially in Persia, and then in Turkey, and finally in Lebanon. During his superiorate he directed a refocusing of the *Collegio Alberoni* on all levels; he knew how to surround himself with excellent collaborators, among whom we note the theologian Raffaele Petrone and the biblicist Gaetano Perrella. In the last few decades, we remember Giacomo Crosignani, professor of dogmatic theology from 1936 until 1961, and director of *Divus Thomas*; Pietro Pizzi (1922-1992), Amedeo Rossi (1894-1986), philosopher and spiritual director, and Giovanni Felice Rossi (1905-1987). In particular, the latter worked with passion and competence. Other than teaching, he did historical research on Cardinal Alberoni, and on the institution the Cardinal founded. He worked for the College's preservation and growth, as well as cultivating an appreciation of its artistic heritage.

One can say that the guidance of the Priests of the Mission has been so very useful for the *Collegio Alberoni* and decisive for its functioning; the Congregation guaranteed unity and continuity in the institution's purpose and educative style. It permitted the consolidation of a sound tradition and promoted authentic progress. A harmonic blending of elements contributes to creating a serene formative environment. While one lives in the atmosphere of a family among superiors, professors, and students, the austerity of discipline and the seriousness of the commitment at all levels never diminishes. If, on the one hand, one recognizes the presence of those who guide and show the way to go, on the

¹⁸ A more complete view can be found in the already cited works *Arte e storia nel Collegio Alberoni di Piacenza*, pp. 38-53 and above all *Cento studi sul cardinale Alberoni*.

other hand one realizes that he has been educated for freedom and responsibility. One does not live by what is imposed, but by what one is convinced of. In full respect for the rhythms of the maturing process of each one, one never loses from sight the ideal one wishes to reach.

But the *Collegio Alberoni* has helped the Congregation of the Mission too. Having the responsibility for an institution such as this has always been a stimulus for a serious formation program for the confreres themselves, many of whom were prepared for priesthood in the *Collegio Alberoni*. The spiritual and cultural exchange between the College and the confreres has been great.

If the union between the Congregation of the Mission and the *Collegio Alberoni* has been happy and fruitful, what can one say of the relationship between the institution and the Church of Piacenza? In this regard, one must recall above all that Cardinal Alberoni did not intend to create a seminary that was an alternative and antagonist in respect to the one already existing, but simply to make a gift to his diocese of origin, opening or facilitating access to the priesthood to poor young men. He himself considered the Bishop of Piacenza as an authority to whom his institute should always respond: the documents of foundation call the bishop the “successor” to the founder. History has noted some moments of tension and polemic between the *Collegio Alberoni* and the Urban Seminary of Piacenza with repercussions, besides its relationships between priests formed in one or the other institution, also those between diocesan authorities and the *Collegio Alberoni*. But, overall one can say that the Church of Piacenza has considered the *Collegio Alberoni* (and the presence of the Priests of the Mission in it) as a blessing, defending it more than once. *Collegio Alberoni* and the Urban Seminary of Piacenza have worked well for the Church and for society. On the contrary who knows if the healthy competition between the two has not produced greater results.¹⁹

A history that continues

At the center of so much attention, in its over two hundred year history, the *Collegio Alberoni* has received illustrious visits of men of state, of culture, and of the Church. Two in particular have honored it: that of Pius VI from April 15 to April 17, 1799, and that of John Paul II on June 5, 1988. The first was a pause for rest by a Pope, sick, a prisoner, and unjustly being conducted into exile,²⁰ who found comfort in a good, devoted, attentive, and cordial hospitality; the second constituted a brief rest for a Pope in full activity of his apostolic ministry. As L. Mezzadri observed, the presence of John Paul II, more than for the gifts and for what was said, “was significant for the ideal mission it

¹⁹ Those who wish to deepen their knowledge in this area may usefully consult the works cited many times that treat of the history of the *Collegio Alberoni*; more specifically, for the polemic concerning the origin of Neo-Thomism, cf. G. F. Rossi, *La filosofia del Collegio Alberoni e il neotomismo*, Piacenza, 1959-1961, and diverse articles that appeared in *Divus Thomas*.

²⁰ The pause for rest of Pius VI is remembered by a commemorative stone marker in the atrium of the *Collegio Alberoni*.

gave to the community. He prayed in the Collegio and he gave a view to the community of an apostolic commitment that has as a horizon the new millennium of the Christian era...”²¹

It is in this line that the joint commitment of the *Collegio Alberoni* and the Priests of the Mission continues, in the hope of being able to write still more glorious pages of history of the service to the Church and to society.

(ROBERT J. STONE, C.M., translator)

²¹ In *Arte e storia nel Collegio Alberoni di Piacenza*, p. 53.