

A Short Life of Blessed Marcantonio Durando (1801-1880)

*By a group of Nazarene Sisters
Turin, Italy*

1. The family: childhood and youth

The Durandos were a respected and wealthy family in Mondovì. They had ten children, of whom two died in infancy. Marcantonio was born on 22 May 1801. The family atmosphere was one of liberalism tainted with secularism, even if not always with real anticlericalism. The mother, Angela Vinaj, however, was very religious and rich in Christian virtues, and there is no doubt that she had great influence on her son Marcantonio. She saw to it that he was brought up more carefully because she detected real openness in him.

Marcantonio's lifestyle was clearly marked by his mother's influence. This was behind his going to the diocesan seminary in Mondovì at the age of 14, to begin philosophy and theology. His exceptional degree of maturity suggests that already at that stage of his education he was weighing up other possibilities for dedicating his life to the Lord's kingdom. In fact, his departure for the novitiate of the Priests of the Mission, at the age of 17, happened more or less suddenly. He was a prayerful and reflective young man. We know that his decision to join the Congregation of the Mission was because he wanted to be a missionary in China. At that time the Vincentians had a very extensive and thriving mission there which, from time to time, experienced anti-Christian persecution.

When he had completed his first year in the novitiate he was sent to resume his theology in the seminary in Sarzana, which was staffed by the Vincentians. The superior of the novitiate sent a report on him to the superior of the seminary, in which he said:

Brother Durando is someone of the highest quality in every way, and is clearly sent by God for the current needs of the Congregation ... He is calm, he is systematic, is respectful and humble; so, I hope you will be very pleased with him.

There was a brief interruption of his studies in 1822, for two reasons. His health was not too good at the time, and his mother died. He felt this more than his brothers did. This period strengthened him, and prepared him for ordination to the priesthood. He was ordained in the cathedral in Fossano on 12 June 1824.

His frequently repeated request to be sent on the foreign missions was not granted by his superiors. They wanted him to stay at home for the ministry of **parish missions**, including ones in rural areas, and **clergy retreats**.

His zeal was tireless but balanced. The preparation he made, his interior life and his eloquence all contributed, in a decisive way, to the reinvigoration in Piedmont of these two primary ministries of the Congregation.

Here is what one person said about the mission in Sommaria, in the diocese of Turin:

The sermons were given by Fr. Durando. There was a huge attendance at the exercises; the taverns were more or less closed for the duration; confessions began on the fourth day of the mission, and there were so many penitents that 17 confessors, hearing continuously, could not meet the need and many people had to go to neighbouring parishes [...] On 9 February Fr. Durando preached on perseverance; it is impossible for us to describe the emotion which was seen in the huge crowd at the preacher's farewell. No one present could restrain the weeping; tears and choking sobs broke out to such an extent that for a while not a word of what the preacher was saying could be made out.

He spent six years at this work. In 1830 he was appointed superior of the house in Turin. There were many problems to be solved, starting with the reorganization of the priests' quarters. The suppression of religious communities and confiscation of their property during the Napoleonic period had greatly upset the organization of religious life. Priests and brothers had had to find some means or other to maintain themselves. When the storm had passed and calm returned it was necessary to round up the scattered members and provide a house for them where they could resume community living. Fr. Durando succeeded in providing a definite framework in the Turin house, which is the present house, and turned it into a building which could be used for one of the ministries most dear to St. Vincent and most typical of his Community: clergy **conferences** and **retreats for both clergy and laity**.

He was in great demand, and much appreciated, throughout Turin as a counsellor and director of conscience. The archbishop, King Carlo Alberto and other prominent persons went to him for advice and guidance. He rightly became known as "the little St. Vincent of Italy."

The Vincentian house in Turin, which had been a Visitation monastery, became a focal point for the clergy of the city and all Piedmont. The best known persons in that remarkable period of Turin saints, knew it and came often to it for

prayerful recollection, to obtain advice, to come to decisions: St. Benedetto Cottolengo, St. Giuseppe Cafasso, St. John Bosco, St. Leonardo Murialdo, Bl. Giuseppe Allamano, and numberless others, who have enriched the diocese, and Piedmont, by a huge number of useful and holy undertakings.

St. Benedetto Cottolengo took St. Vincent as his model for his undertakings and his spirituality. He made him patron of the main group of his Sisters, and also of his Brothers. St. John Bosco, when he began his ministry of the printed word, which was to teach a trade to his youngsters in Valdocco and to be a way of getting through to people, published a book with the title: *Virtue and Christian Refinement According to the Spirit of St. Vincent de Paul*. Its subtitle was: *A Book for Consecrating the Month of July in Honour of this Saint*. It would not be rash to say that Fr. Durando radiated the spirit of this great saint with simplicity and humility.

2. Director of the Daughters of Charity: almost a Founder.

He worked hard to bring the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul to Italy. His request was accepted and on 16 May 1833 the first two French Daughters of Charity, with the characteristic starched white “cornette,” arrived in Turin. Some more came in August, and from then on more as needed. There was a rapid increase in the number of vocations.

Fr. Durando identified himself with the spirit by which St. Vincent had directed his Daughters. He put to good use the spirit of courageous innovation which he had breathed at home, where his father and brothers were revolutionary: he never refused any proposal for a charitable venture, no matter how risky.

King Carlo Alberto asked him to supply sisters for the Military Hospital. He sent them there, to the great scandal of not a few priests, and he even sent them into military field hospitals during the wars of the Risorgimento. This started with the first one, during which the sisters nursed the wounded, and his brother Giovanni, a general, fought at the side of Carlo Alberto. The Daughters of Charity were also with the expedition to the Crimea.

This great service, along with many others, rendered by the Daughters of Charity, made a great impression on Carlo Alberto, and increased his admiration for Fr. Durando and the Daughters. To the amazement of the general public, Carlo Alberto was seen going to the huge San Salvario convent, which had formerly been occupied by The Servants of Mary, and handing over its keys to the Daughters of Charity. This became their Provincial House, large enough for all their works, both in-house and outside. It is a sort of Vatican Palace, and

today it still proclaims the appreciation of the King for the Vincentian Community and their superior.

3. The Mercy Units

These Mercy Units, *Le Misericordie*, were, in 19th century Turin, the equivalent of *les charités* in St. Vincent's Paris. As the first sisters took their name from those, and were called *Les Filles de la Charité*, the later sisters in Turin were known as *Le Suore della Misericordia*.

The Mercy Units were the main work of the Ladies of Charity, who supported them financially. The Daughters of Charity were the arm which pushed them forward, but Blessed Durando was the mind behind it.

The Mercy Units were real private centres of social assistance, where a poor person found not only hot soup in winter, a wardrobe of clothes to choose from, and basic medical treatment, but also often a job. Above all, though, what he encountered was so much Christian friendliness and charity. It was not help given with a hidden motive, but Christian love, which levelled social differences.

As time went on various other works developed around these centres, such as refuges for children from poor backgrounds or who were neglected because their mothers were working, orphanages, small nursing homes for the elderly, home visits to the poor and sick, etc.

The first Mercy Unit was that of San Francesco da Paolo (1836), which also ministered to the poor in Sant'Eusebio parish, which at that time was called San Filippo because the Oratorians of St. Philip were in charge. This unit was known by even a third name, *Le Cascine*, because it operated in the outbuildings of the Alfieri-Carrù palace not far from the centre of Milan.

The full-time sisters, who lived in the Mercy Units so as to be always on call for those who needed them, were poor like those whom they helped. Many years later one of them said this about Marcantonio Durando:

This good Father came to visit us every week. On one occasion he noticed that I was in bad humour. With his usual kindness he took me aside and asked what was the matter. I told him: "Father, we do not even have cloths to wash our faces! ... We do not have dusters to wipe the furniture, nor dishcloths to clean the pots. We have to make do with paper, and we do not have that either!" The good Father said: "Poor girl, I feel for you! Rest assured that I will see to all that!" The following day a man arrived with a load of old soutanes from which we could make dusters, a length of thick

material from which to make cloths for cleaning the pots, and a dozen beautiful facecloths for washing our faces. Who could fathom my happiness and that of my companions?

Visiting the poor in their homes made the Daughters of Charity aware of other needs which had to be met. There were in particular two types of persons who needed above all a home and a family. These were elderly women with no one to care for them, and young girls whose working mothers could not look after them.

At the suggestion of Marcantonio Durando the Countess Alfieri was pleased to provide a remedy for these needs, and she set up, in her own home, a “mini-hospital” for the old women, and a combined refuge, school and workshop for the girls, both children and teenagers.

The driving force behind all this activity was Fr. Durando, and he was often also the most generous benefactor. Sr. Mattacchio wrote about these beginnings:

He was the president of the Misericordia house. I remember that all those women, busy about the works of the house, would not move a leaf without Father noticing.

One of the best all-round Mercy Units was the first one, that of San Massimo and the Madonna of the Angels. It was established in 1854 and was directed by the Servant of God Sr. Maria Clarac. Over the winter this unit would give out up to 14,000 helpings of soup. Its refuge cared for up to 400 children.

Following the first Mercy Unit in the parish of San Massimo another was opened in San Salvatio in 1856, and in 1865 the Mercy Unit of San Carlo was separated from those in Le Cascine. The Servant of God Luigia Borgiotti contributed generously to this foundation. At that time she was collaborating with Fr. Durando in the founding of the Nazarene Sisters.

Ten years later, in 1874, another Mercy Unit was opened. This was in the Istituto dei SS Angeli, quite a distance from central Turin, on the other side of the Po.

The final help centre was opened by Fr. Durando in 1879, shortly before his death. This was once again in the parish of San Massimo, in Via S. Lazzaro (the present Via dei Mille), and was called San Massimo Mercy Unit Two. At its formal opening at least 200 Ladies of the San Massimo Group were there with Fr. Durando.

In this way Turin had a veritable network of works of charity to which the poor could freely come, knowing that they would be welcomed and helped.

In the Minutes of the San Carlo Mercy Unit for 1880 the death of Fr. Durando is referred to: *In Turin he was the real initiator of the associations of mercy.*

One can only join in joyfully with such an opinion. The work done over so many years of assiduous work by these centres of Vincentian charity will in some way leave a shining wake in the water from which it sprang.

4. The Children of Mary (1856)

In the Miraculous Medal apparitions in Paris in 1830 Our Lady asked Catherine Labouré for this Association. Pius IX did not give approval till 1846, and it was introduced into Italy by Fr. Durando in 1856 for the girls who were in residence, and for those coming to the workshop, in Le Cascine Mercy Unit, the Alfieri-Carrù Institute.

The purpose of this association was not precisely charity towards the poor, but rather the Christian and Marian formation of youth. Many others followed the establishment of the first group, and Fr. Durando had powerful help from his confreres in this ministry. It could be said that in every centre for young people which was run by the Daughters of Charity, the association of the Children of Mary was set up. Such associations had a profound effect on the spiritual formation of the young. They were real seedbeds of religious vocations, of devout mothers of families, and of women apostles in everyday life.

5. Visitor of the Province of Upper Italy

In 1837 he was appointed Visitor of the Province of Upper Italy, known at that time as the Province of Lombardy. In those days, such an appointment, and for somebody so young, was definitely something unusual. It showed the reputation which had grown up around him in the short while that he had been superior of the central house in Turin.

There were seven houses, in which various ministries were carried out with dedication: parish missions, retreats, formation of novices and students, in Turin, Genoa and Casale Monferrato. They had the ministry of formation for the secular priesthood in the Collegio Alberoni in Piacenza, in their own college in Sarzana, and in the Collegio di Savona.

By the time of Durando's death the number of houses had almost doubled. The new houses were in Mondovì, Scarnafigi, the Brignole-Sale college in Genoa, the Casa della Pace in Chieri, Casale Monferrato, Cagliari and Sassari.

The list can be quickly run through, but poor Fr. Durando had to travel a worrying and painful Via Crucis because of the storm caused by the suppression of religious communities on 3 July 1866!

Along with the suppression there was also, obviously, the confiscation of all property, houses and possessions. This meant that Durando had to buy back, in various ways, each confiscated house, one by one.

It should also be borne in mind that this business of buying back each individual house, as well as the enormous financial outlay which it involved, was a huge worry for Fr. Durando. He could not bequeath the houses and possessions to the Community, because it was legally suppressed, but he had to leave them to individual persons, with all the risks involved and the expenses connected with inheritance.

6. During the "Troubles" of the Italian Risorgimento

The events of the Risorgimento involved Fr. Marcantonio Durando, because he was a brother of General Giovanni Durando. He was a dissenting general who led the Pontifical Army in the first war of independence, fighting heroically in the Crimea, at San Martino della Battaglia, and at Custoza. He was also a brother of General Giacomo Durando, who was a journalist, and who supported the long series of repressive laws concerning church property and the operation of religious communities. He was a minister in the Rattazzi government from March to December 1862. Fr. Marcantonio never gave up on advising and admonishing his brothers when they took extreme positions, especially if these were anti-clerical. He wrote to his brother Giacomo in 1857:

With all my heart I want peace between the government and the Church, and that there should be an end to this uneasiness in which we find ourselves all the time, and an end, in short, to this attacking of the Church and its institutions and its rules, and, in short, that we be allowed to live and breathe.

And when, in 1870, support from France had failed and Rome was occupied by force, Fr. Marcantonio wrote him a long letter in which he showed his puzzlement at what had happened and at the intentions of the politicians and men in power at the time:

Reflect, and if your heart disapproves, as I suspect, object, or at least speak out openly ... At your age, and in view of all that you have accomplished, you should not be afraid of the idle talk of some newspaper, or some exaggeration...

His conclusion was:

I love and wish for the greatness of Italy and, I will say it again, unity achieved by legitimate means, and I wish for, and see the importance of, absolute independence for the Vatican, intrinsic to, and essential for, its splendour, just as much as for the greatness and unity of Italy!

Perhaps he did not speak out openly, or sufficiently openly.

The government and parliament kept up the anti-clerical pressure. On the pretext that some priests were involving themselves in politics, they wanted to restrict the ministry of the clergy. Fr. Durando got the impression that the clergy did not have the courage to stand up to this. On the other hand, lay people did, even the liberals who did not have a preconceived anti-clerical position.

It was unacceptable that there should be this lack of freedom of expression, especially when the first article of the Constitution itself laid down that the Christian religion was the majority one. He wrote:

O happy America, of the United States, where liberty is extended to everyone, and the clergy, religious communities, Protestants, Dissenters, and Catholics, all combine to form just one united and compact nation. In our case we normally neither hear nor see anything except ideas, projects, regulations and stingy minutiae which do not raise up the nation, do not make it great, do not encourage morality, because the religious dimension is absent from everything.

His brothers, though, retained their affection for him and even tried to help him. This was the case especially when the administration of the United Italy wanted to extend the laws of the State of Savoy to all Italy, including the repressive norms. These also affected the houses of the Congregation in the Provinces of Roma and Naples. Fr. Marcantonio, prompted even by the General Curia, let his brother Giacomina know the facts. Unfortunately, this made little difference.

7. At the School of Jesus Crucified: Founder of the Nazarene Sisters

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that this foundation was Fr. Durando's main work, though it could more affectionately be called a **work of the heart**.

The provisions of Church law at that time meant that entry into the consecrated life was forbidden to anyone born outside of a Church marriage; this was the classic "irregularity of birth." Fr. Durando was in contact with many institutions for orphan girls, or girls of illegitimate birth. At that time such girls remained in these homes until the age of 21. Again and again he found himself meeting excellent young women, educated by the sisters, who felt called to the religious life. Naturally enough, they consulted the priest whom they knew best, Fr. Durando. Many times he tried, without success, to have them accepted into various communities. He resolved this situation with the same courage and initiative which he had shown in sending sisters on to the battlefield. On the occasion of the reception of the habit by the first sisters he himself, spoke about it in words which even today, 136 years later, touch and stir the heart:

27 September 1866

It is several years now, you see, since some of you turned to my poor protection for support in your attempts to be admitted to some religious community. I did my utmost to back you up, by making recommendations, proposals, suggesting advice, but every initiative of mine was fruitless, no matter what community I approached, whether in Turin or elsewhere, bearing in mind the spiritual good of you all. As a result of my not being able to achieve a successful outcome, I began to reflect on what was involved in this business, to such an extent that I had difficulty in getting it out of my mind. What happened was that, moving from one idea to another, almost without adverting to it, the whole matter was so fixed in my mind that I solved it by offering myself to the Lord for this work in his service.

I was already debating with myself: but these poor girls, should they not be helped in some way in their desire to leave the world in order to give themselves over to God's service? Should there not be some haven, some framework of a religious community, among the many which exist in Turin and elsewhere, which can, or wants to, accept them? And if it is a question of setting up for them a special Company in which they would be received, and where they would be a separate group, living a holy, virtuous and Christian life, sanctifying themselves and edifying others, well, then, why could not a religious community be established? And also, from whom do these holy young women receive the good inspiration? Who suggests to them the good intention of giving themselves to God?

They are definitely moved by the goodness and will of God..., and if the matter originates in God, they should, then, be helped in this holy idea of theirs.

Also, are not these girls destined for paradise? So, if they live holy lives, a fine reward awaits them in heaven, which, perhaps, many men and women will not have, people who may be important on earth and could easily have entered religious communities!

Oh, yes! These girls can be, can become, chosen souls, dear to God, more so than my wretched self, the last of God's sacred ministers. As a result of these thoughts, and urged on by your repeated requests to me, I decided to trust divine Providence and follow up the good intention by carrying it out. Oh! What a really loveable arrangement by God's merciful goodness to you, my good daughters! Oh! The great grace of a religious vocation! I encourage you, then, my daughters, to welcome this loving plan of divine Providence with the greatest gratitude, because, thanks to God, every obstacle in the way of consecrating yourselves to God's service having been smoothed out, you can do so with great fervour and lasting zeal.

And that is how the Community of the Daughters of the Passion of Jesus the Nazarene was born. It is still extant and effective, and is more simply known as the Nazarene Sisters. The new Community did not come on the scene to meet a particular need outside itself, so the founder did not immediately designate a definite end for it. Following his initial objective, which was to make the consecrated life possible for them, he launched them with these words: *Pray, obey, and make saints of yourselves!*

Following St. Vincent's way of acting, he waited for signs of divine Providence. Helping the sick in their own homes, night and day, was indicated. The different pastoral situation of that era should be noted. At that time poor people ended their lives in hospital, where they were given dedicated spiritual help. On the other hand, better off people were cared for at home, and normally did not meet either priests or nuns. The ministry of the Nazarene Sisters was quickly seen to be of great help for the salvation of the souls of those whom they helped. There are various famous and legendary conversions of important persons, who ended their days totally changed.

As well as ministry to the sick, and to abandoned babies, Fr. Durando also introduced them to devotion to the Passion of Jesus, which was already his own *spiritual treasure*. He had also spread this devotion among the general public,

and in the Vincentian church in Turin he had erected a *Chapel of the Passion*, which is still popular.

He wanted to bequeath to his daughters a rich heritage of devotion and spirituality, and he bound them to this devotion by a fourth vow.

8. The Missionary Commitment

...it was not God's will that I should go to China. I put my heart at ease.... That is the same as saying that the desire which had guided him as a youth to choose to join a religious community, which would have allowed him to go on the foreign missions, instead of the secular clergy, was always present to his mind. When various situations arose, it was this that determined the choices which he made. He supported, and got his confreres to support, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. He succeeded in sending it 20.000 *lire*, which the politician Camillo Cavour and his brother Gustavo, a devout God-fearing man, had, but they could not decide to which of them it belonged.

Under the guidance of Providence he had ample scope to help the foreign missions. He welcomed all the requests from his confreres to be sent on the foreign missions, and encouraged them to ask. He had been unable to accept going along with Fr. Justin De Jacobis, now canonised, to Ethiopia; there was the possibility of his being appointed Prefect Apostolic. He agreed to the departure for that region of Frs. Giuseppe Sapeto and Giovanni Stella. Unfortunately they did not turn out to be missionaries, but one became an explorer and the other a conqueror.

In the history of Italy they are remembered as the forerunners of Italian colonial expansion in Eritrea. But in contrast to these “failures” it must be remembered that at least 27 of his missionaries left for Syria, Abyssinia, North America, Brazil and China, with excellent results. The missionaries from Turin, with Felix de Andreis, were among the founders of the Vincentian Provinces in the USA.

The Marchese Brignole Sale, ambassador of Piedmont, mayor of Genoa, withdrew from public life because of the anti-clerical attitude of Piedmont, and so was able to devote his attention and his wealth to plans which he had. Along with the noblewoman Artemisia Negroni, he wanted to establish a seminary for vocations to the foreign missions. He put the Vincentians of Genoa in charge of it. Fr. Durando, as Visitor, was fully cooperative. The Brignole Sale Negroni college was ready to begin its work in 1854. Three of the 24 seminarians, who were non fee-paying, finished their studies and were ordained in 1858, and left for California. Over a period of 30 years 110 priests left from the seminary. Later

on the college welcomed seminarians from abroad, who came to Italy for their studies. Some of the alumni became bishops and important churchmen.

9. A Fine Replica of St. Vincent

From 1830 to 1880, when he was in Turin, Fr. Marcantonio Durando was seen as the initiator of a great number of projects, a person to whom people went, or should have gone, to seek advice, to learn what path to take, and a role model to be imitated. Because of his innate ability, his deep spirituality, his family's involvement in the political scene, which implicated himself as well and gave him a certain standing, and because of his large circle of friends, he found himself caught up in an endless round of entanglements to be unravelled, within his own community, in the diocesan structures, in religious communities and in the difficult relations with the civil authorities.

He needed to have the virtues of courtesy, gentleness and humility, but also strength and firmness, and it is well known that the latter two virtues are less welcomed by people than the former ones.

And there were times when he was not appreciated.

This shows him in a realistic light, and comes from history rather than from a panegyric. Like so many other people he had to put up with the bitter taste of not being understood and of unsympathetic opinions. There were, also, times when he felt discouraged.

It was fortunate, though, that he never lost his mastery of self. His health showed all the signs of frailty, yet he reached his 80th year.

He would have liked to step down from his positions as Visitor and Director of the Daughters of Charity, because advancing years had increased his ailments, yet all he was offered was the help of a confrere who relieved him of much of the work.

Because of this he had more time for prayer and recollection. Stooped though age, seated in an armchair, he still retained his cheerful and kind expression. His desk was still strewn with letters to be dealt with.

In the summer of 1880 he was still strong enough to go to Casale Monferrato, and the Collegio di Virle, one of the many establishments with which he was involved. He had wanted to be present at the consecration of the Children of Mary, the association which he had introduced into Italy.

After that he went downhill, and died around one-thirty on 10 December.

Fr. Giovanni Rinaldi, superior of the Casa della Pace in Chieri, remarked: “We have lost another St Vincent.”

This notion was well received by all the Vincentians, and it became widely accepted that Fr. Marcantonio Durando should be seen as another St. Vincent.

In actual fact, if one looks well at his personality, his style of intervention, his way of dealing with affairs, his skill in interpreting St. Vincent’s thought and putting it into practice, even after well over a century one can only endorse this idea.

During the ceremonies at the time of his death some unknown facts emerged. For example, Msgr. Frasoni, Archbishop of Turin, turned to Fr. Durando for the revision of the Rules of Don Bosco’s Salesians, and of those of Antonio Rosmini’s Institute of Charity. Rosmini was a great friend of the Vincentians.

(THOMAS DAVITT CM, *translator*)