

The Unedited Collection of Letters of Blessed Marcantonio Durando

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Fr. Durando never wrote a book, nor published one, except for an “educative” pamphlet, written for an Institute of the Daughters of Charity at Fontanetta Po.

His collection of letters, however, is a veritable “monument,” and a mine of information on civil and religious life, on the spiritual direction of persons, of the dispositions of governance for the works, etc., from 1831-1880.

Today his correspondence is collected in eight large volumes, typewritten, and photocopied, with an accompanying analytical index.

I spent a long time working like a Carthusian, in order to transcribe the texts of the “original” letters, the notes, and the reports.

They form a document of great historical importance, and not only for Vincentian studies. Among the many letters, a particular importance is found in those of the *Epistolary Risorgimento*, published in the *Annali Della Missione* in 1969-1978.

1. The sources

I list these with a certain order of importance:

- 1) *Archives of the C.M. General Curia, Rome*: Conserves the correspondence of Blessed Durando with the Superiors General and the Italian Assistants General.
- 2) *Archives of the Museo del Risorgimento of Turin, and the Vatican Library*: These are letters of high historic value, addressed for the most part to his brother, Giacomo, Minister of State. They embrace the period of over 30 years from 1847-1879.
- 3) *Letters found in various archives in the Dioceses of the Piedmont region, especially in Mondovì, Saluzzo, Fossano, etc.*
- 4) *Letters in the archives of various houses of the Congregation of the Mission*: Turin, Chieri, Mondovì, etc.
- 5) *Letters of individual sisters or lay people, collected by Fr. Giovanni Tonello, by the Daughters of Charity, the Nazarene Sisters, and by the Magdalens of the Marchioness of Barolo.*
- 6) *Twenty letters of Fr. Durando, preserved and published by Fr. Vito Guarini, concerning the Secret Storm on the Vincentian Family,*

1842-1843 (attempt to separate the confreres of Italy from Paris).

I have collected as many as I could, but I do not exclude that there might be many letters still in circulation written by Blessed Durando.

2. Content

Every little happening in the houses of the confreres was punctually reported by the Visitor to the Italian Assistant General or to the Superior General, with the frequency of about one letter per month. Thus it was for 40 years. Hundreds of figures of confreres, of Daughters of Charity, or of notable persons in the civic or the religious world, come before our eyes vividly and synthetically treated with their virtues and their defects, enthusiasms, and spiritual crises. The protagonists of civil and religious life during the *Risorgimento*, mentioned by Blessed Durando, go from Pius IX to Garibaldi, from Kings Carlo Alberto and Vittorio Emmanuele II to Emperor Napoleon III, from Rosmini to Gioberti, from Msgr. Frasoni and his sad trials to Faà di Bruno, from the brothers Camillo and Gustavo Cavour to General La Marmora and the events in the Crimea.

Blessed Durando followed every event with a watchful eye and did not stop struggling against deleterious liberalism and the intrigues of Freemasonry.

3. Fr. Durando as a keen writer

The language of Fr. Durando is obviously that of his time. However, his use of language is lucid and clear: simple, legible handwriting, good punctuation, very rarely any crossing out, even though he is writing in a “stream of consciousness” style. Frequently we find expressions from the Piedmont regions, French expressions, and appropriate Latin citations that are part of his wit.

Of some lazy confreres, he writes: *Fruges consumare nati* = born only to consume provisions!

Of a confrere who many times had promised to correct in himself a very grave defect with no success, Blessed Marcantonio sadly writes: *Substantiae non mutantur! ... Potest Aetiops mutare pellem suam?* = The substance cannot be changed. Can an Ethiopian change the color of his skin?

Of a superior miserly in the smallest things, he said: *Ab ungue disce leonem!* = Judge the lion by his claws!

A confrere who was a big eater was defined as: *The best teeth in the house*. Another, as secret as thunder, was called: *a trumpet!* Two rival confreres in the same house: *two cocks in a chicken coop*. Of another, stubborn in on his own ideas, Blessed Marcantonio writes: *When he puts a nail in, there is no way to make him change it*. One time a confrere had overstepped against his own superior rather passionately. Fr. Durando commented: *Let us hope that this*

winter's snow will cool off such a great fire!

Of a subject not very competent to be a treasurer, Fr. Durando wrote to Paris: *He is as good to be the procurer as I am to be a poet.*

4. Typical expressions

Some of the expressions from the pen Fr. Durando are quite tasty.

When they are in rags, they run to the Visitor; which means: the local superiors incur debts, and when they do not know how to get out of them, they go to the Visitor.

If I do not have any fire means: if I do not have other subjects. *Il busillis é unde capere* = The difficult thing is where to find it.

Stitch it together again (mend) means to fix a situation with the last expedient.

Pulling it with your teeth = a difficult economic situation.

Beat it into the countryside or get out of an affair = keep one's distance or wash one's hands of an affair.

Take your time and you will get by = have patience.

From "liberal" priests, libera nos, Domine!

Fr. Durando knew how to laugh at himself. He did not know the French language very well, and he was even worse at writing it. Thus, one time he asked Fr. Sturchi, an Assistant General, to read over and correct a letter of his before giving it to the Superior General.

Be so kind as to read the enclosed letter before sealing it. You will find in it a piece of eloquence and so much purity of the French language and elocution, that if I were known as I merit to be, I would be made a member of the French Academy. You can clearly see that do not want to die of melancholy.

5. Spiritual and organizational content

The collected letters of Blessed Durando are also a firsthand testimony of his humility, of his charity toward his confreres, and of his method of action.

From 1839 until the end of his life, he never desisted from asking the Superior General to relieve him of the burdens of being Visitor, Superior, and Director of the Daughters of Charity. His useless requests were renewed in 1845-

46-47-48-56-63-71-72 and in the following years until his death, but every one of his requests ran counter to the wishes of Fr. Etienne.

Fr. Etienne, the Superior General, was much more decisive in disciplinary determinations, but Fr. Durando calmed him, adopting the methodology of *fortiter et suaviter* — *If one would yearn for some subjects too zealous for good order — he wrote — may I be like a German who speaks and raises a stick at the same time; but to proceed in this way seems against the spirit of our saint. If one can attain the same thing without shouting in a little more time, ... it seems more convenient to me.*

Of a confrere who was about to be dismissed by the Superior General, Blessed Marcantonio wrote, defending him:

The poor boy, what will he do now? To dismiss him seems harsh to me, because you would deprive him of a pension, if the law were to be applied ... I would not want to go against the Apostle who says Caritas omnia sperat [love hopes for all things]! In men, I have little hope; the Lord will do all ... When possible, let things be done calmly, and Providence will do the rest.

We know of his love for the foreign missions: his own vocation among the missionaries of St. Vincent came from his desire to go as a missionary to China. As Visitor and as representative of the Propagation of the Faith, Fr. Durando was one of the most active supporters of the foreign missions, contributing personnel and material help. In 1841, he wrote to Fr. Fiorillo, Assistant General: *I was not worthy to go to the foreign missions; at least I can cooperate with you in some way....*

*The needs of the missions touch me, and speaking between you and me, I feel dead, and I no longer have the strength and he did what was possible to send missionaries to the missions *ad gentes*.*

What Fr. Durando could not stomach was inertia or laziness. With a lot of pain, he wrote one day: *There are houses where our confreres do nothing, ... they do not go out to give missions, or spiritual exercises ... Not a few of them are bored!*

How much it must have made him rejoice when he was able to write to Paris in 1877:

The house in Turin gives 10 or 12 missions a year, some short, some long ... and they are as fruitful now as they were 40 or 50 years ago. Our confreres who go on the missions have never displeased the local authorities in all these years, because they take care not to get into political matters. Actually, rather frequently the mayor and the local authorities come to visit the confreres when

they have finished, and more than once the musical band of the area has accompanied the confreres to the railroad station. Rarely do you find someone who has not received the sacraments. The thank you letters that I receive from the pastors are truly moving.

I do not have enough space to continue the analysis of the letters of our new Blessed, so I ask interested readers to consult the two volumes I published in 1987-1988.

6. Fr. Durando through his collection of letters

Vol. I — *L'uomo di governo* [The man of government]; Vol. II — *L'uomo di virtù* [The man of virtue].

The collection of letters of which I have tried to give a synthetic idea has cost me a lot of work. Perhaps it will never be published, but the archives of the confreres and of the Nazarene Sisters have a copy of it, always at the disposition even of persons who do not belong to the Community.

(ROBERT STONE, C.M., translator)