

*Biographical notes of Fr. Gaetano Liuzzo o.m.i.
Historical Founder of the Secular Institute
C.O.M.I.¹*

Gaetano Maria was born on December 18, 1911, from Liuzzo Rampino and Francesca Triscari, in a countryside home of Tortorici District, in the Sicilian hinterland, at 150 km from Messina in the center of Nebrodi. He was the last of six children, three females and three males.

His father, like many contemporaries, had first emigrated to the United States of America and, after working for three years, had returned to Tortorici where he had purchased a wood of filbert trees, built a house and started a commercial activity at home.

His mother, a woman of great generosity, did not have good health and, as did the majority of women at that time, she integrally devoted herself to the management of the house, the education of her children and the weaving of flax and wool.

The peasant population was scattered in the great part of the countryside, while the core of the country included many ancient churches with some paintings of the XVII century. Over the centuries, the country had periods of great flourishing and tragic moments, like the flood of June 6, 1682, that destroyed houses, churches and workshops, as well as artisans' shops, then famous for metalworking and especially for the fusion of bells. A century passed before the economy of the country could return to being flourishing.

About Gaetano's childhood, we know that *“he was quite a naughty little boy, but exceptionally good at school and had a special attachment to his mother”*², that was proved when in 1917 his brother Sebastian died in the Battle of Caporetto during the First World War: *“Touching were the screams of my mother's desperation that she could never console. She regretted that for a breath her son had not left for America, otherwise he*

¹ Taken from “Fraternità e ardore missionario”, Rolando Polzelli, Rome, July 2005

² Vittorio Barbagiovanni, *Mio zio, padre Gaetano Liuzzo, manuscript*, COMI Archives.

would still be alive”³. “That little boy (Gaetano was six years old) wept with his mother, embraced her with touching words of consolation and did everything possible to wipe her tears with a handkerchief”⁴

About two years later (1919), his brothers, Giuseppina and Antonio, left for the United States of America and Angela for France. Maria Rosa continued her studies until she graduated as a teacher and then went teaching in various locations in Sicily.

Once he had finished the elementary school, Gaetano continued his studies with the help of two priests, and had to sit and pass an exam as an external candidate to gain access to higher education.

*“Perhaps it’s at that time that the priesthood vocation matured in him and in 1924 he left for the seminary to become an O.M.I missionary. For my mother (it is her sister Maria Rosa speaking) this event was in a certain sense joyous since at that time it was a great honor to have a priest at home. Besides, a certain prestige was acquired among the people, in addition to the fact that the event was interpreted as a sign of the divine will. His departure for the seminary was accompanied by the blessing of my parents.”*⁵ He left for the Apostolic School O.M.I. of St. Mary a Vico (CE) where Gaetano continued his studies until the fourth year of the secondary school and then entered the novitiate on July 15, 1928, in Ripalimosani (CB).

Let us listen to F. Gaetano himself talking about the fundamental experience of those years through an autobiographical tale 'masked' with the pseudonym of 'Gigino':

³ Vittorio Barbagiovanni, *Una maestrina d'altri tempi*, Armando Siciliano Editore, Messina, 2001, p. 37.

⁴ Vittorio Barbagiovanni, *Mio zio, padre Gaetano Liuzzo, manuscrit*, COMI Archives.

⁵ Vittorio Barbagiovanni, *Una maestrina d'altri tempi*, Armando Siciliano Editore, Messina, 2001, p. 53.

”Gigino – said suddenly his friend – and what about becoming a priest or a missionary? But Gigi, a twelve-year old young boy, lively and intelligent, feisty and at the same time a scamp and a lover of comfort, resolutely and ruthlessly took off: 'Priest never! Priest, do it yourself. Yet the grace of God worked and a good day ... he left content with a missionary, for our Apostolic School.

Apostolic school! Nest of eaglet without feathers yearning to have a plumage: A gym of efforts and joyful dynamism in the study, in the formation of character, in the assimilation of many great and beautiful ideas...

Gigino grasped: what a deep impression in those immense corridors, in those severe classrooms, in that welcoming chapel dominated by a sweet Immaculate that seemed to rock with her gaze the baby boys whose cheeks were still enamelled with the warm tears of the last kiss of mom!

Those courtyards as big as half a square of his small village, and the passionate games, and the delightful walks through valleys and hills!

...

The study of Latin was the first not mild ‘difficulty’ to overcome.

He had ‘chewed’ with so much taste the spiny pages of mathematics, he had thrown himself passionately into the ‘capricious’ pronunciation of French; but he had always looked at that blessed Latin with a suspicious distrust, so much so that previously he had chosen the middle school where it was possible to do without it.

How many worries, how much headaches, but then finally how much joy to master those desinences and concordances and getting to the honor roll! Victory, yes, but with what sweaty!

But it was still necessary to be trained in godliness, fraternal charity, self-control and the control of his own defects, that were not few: My God, what a difficult field, besides the Latin!

The spiritual exercises, that were awaited with anxiety and yet followed with interest, gave him so many things, opening up magnificent unsuspected horizons and giving him strength and courage.

Daily communion and her love for the Virgin Mary constantly renewed it. The vocation grew and matured.

Nevertheless, there were also anxieties, disturbances and bitter tears for the faults of the scamp he used to be, and came the joy of 'rebirth'. How many question were persisting! and how much shyness in that little soul!

One day the Father Director called him into his room, plunged his expert pupils into the heart of the boy and conquered him forever: Gigetto came out happy, and mad by running the spacious corridors ...

Then came the anxiety of the joyous ascent that seems sweet and cherished even in the midst of so many little sacrifices: far from wanting to flee from them, he sought instead to multiply them as an attestation of reparation for his past faults and as a sign of love for the Heavenly Mother.

He became a little apostle among the new comers, an elder brother, affectionate and charitable, relishing the joy of the sower of goodness and fervor.

Then came the novitiate: a year of serene joy, of enviable felicity in spite of the trials which chastised him without discouraging him

... And arrived this unforgettable August 15, that placed the halo in his life with the first religious profession⁶

He pronounced his first temporary vows at Ripalimosani (CB), on August 15, 1929 and for this occasion, he wrote to the Provincial OMI: *"Reverend and Beloved Father, here I am finally Oblate! And as such, with the 'Passport' in hand, I want to send you last greetings from the house so dear of Ripa, sweet crib of our religious life, and a beloved witness of our birth, our first steps, our efforts, and our whole and irrevocable sacrifice! Whole because all, all - goods, body and will – we*

⁶ Itinerari di luce: Faticosamente in *Voce di Maria*, Anno XXVIII, n. 10, Rome, October 1949, p. 142.

have all put together and all we have offered to Jesus, the Poor, the Virgin, the obedient and to the sweet Mom, the first religious ...,

From this, as I hope, Jesus and the Virgin Mary of Assumption have accepted and blessed our gift done this morning with all our heart, without any regret, and then renewed along the day, dozens of times! ... Irrevocable because instead of saying – ad annum (for one year) - we said, with great joy (as we did with heart) “perpetuam”.

The triple annual Oblation is not and will never be for us a pure formality set by the Holy Rule, for the holocaust, with the heart, has been completely and forever consumed, and our embrace to the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, made stronger by the triple gold chain, will be constant, continuous, perpetual ... eternal”⁷

Fr. Gaetano was transferred to S. Giorgio Canavese (TO) to complete his studies and his formation. Once there he renewed his vows, in the successive years, and on December 27, 1932, he made the perpetual oblation. This is how his superiors presented him:

“From the early years, he is described in the notes as a very sensitive and affective subject. An energetic, constant and enterprising will. By virtue, he is sweet and calm; by nature, he would be impulsive and impetuous. Great Spirit of faith; deep devotion, strong filial love for the Virgin Mary. Humble and mortified without ostentation. Strongly attached to the vocation and to the Congregation. He aspires to the foreign missions.

With this very short and laconic language, Gaetano Liuzzo was presented to both Perpetual Profession and Priesthood. His long life makes the truth of that portrait.”⁸

⁷ Dall’omelia del Superiore Provinciale OMI, tenuta in occasione del funerale di p. Gaetano Liuzzo OMI il 17 novembre 2003 a Vermicino di Frascati (RM) in *Comunicazioni*, n. 5, Cooperatrici Oblate Missionarie dell’Immacolata (C.O.M.I.), Roma, 20 Novembre 2003, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

Let us come back to the biographical notes of Fr. Gaetano and listen to the way he describes us this experience:” *The seminary immersed him again in studies; but new, beautiful, severe and sometimes extravagant studies: letters, sciences, philosophy. Yes, even philosophy with its refining power and mind-forming force. What years of peace, delight, and inner work to break the 'old man' always reborn and to magnify the 'new man', what happy days sometimes spent in the Alps during his holidays, in constant contact with the Infinite!*

The Perpetual profession, at the threshold of Theology, marked a point of arrival and a starting point: He was not by now the Gigetto of eight years before. He was now twenty-one old and full of fire, a fire that was spreading more and more in the passionate quest of missions and of the ideal. How much tears, sweet and conscious, poured on these books of heroism and splendid charm; how many wonderful 'discoveries' among the boundless fields of Theology and what a joyful pride he felt when receiving the minor Orders, the Subdiaconate (Ivrea 1933 ndr), the Diaconate (Ivrea, 22.9.1934 ndr) and finally the Priesthood... The summit was reached! Reached, yes; but now it needed to be valorized: and now here he is, pilgrim of love looking for souls, always, everywhere, wherever!”⁹

The priestly ordination was celebrated at St. Giorgio Canavese on July 7, 1935, unfortunately, the year after his father's death due to pneumonia.

“ After many years I met again my brother Gaetano, whom after being ordained a missionary priest, came home to celebrate, to the great joy of my mother: 'You gave me great happiness, may God always illuminate your path' she told him and then added with a tone of devotion: ' Pray always for us and for all the poor and needy'. He said the first mass in the village Mother Church and so many people attended.

⁹ Itinerari di luce: Faticosamente in *Voce di Maria*, Anno XXVIII, n. 10, Rome, October 1949, p. 142-143.

He became professor of literature and Sacred Scripture at the School of Theology of St. Giorgio Canavese and a great preacher also."¹⁰

His mother died the following year.

Once ordained priest he stays at S. Giorgio as the Treasurer of the O.M.I community and professor of Literature and Sciences. In love with the missions, in 1937 he began a work of "missionary propaganda" in the parishes of the surrounding area. Encouraged by his superiors, since 1939 - in free time from teaching – he broadens the action of Missionary Animation especially in Major Seminaries in Northern Italy.

In 1940, his charge of treasurer was changed with that of Director of the Propaganda Office, while he remained professor but now teaching Church History and Sacred Scriptures.

In 1947, he assumes his new charge as Provincial Director of the Missionary Association of Mary Immaculate (AMMI) while continuing to be a teacher, but only until July 14, 1949 when he is transferred to Florence. Once free from his school duties, he poured his energy – until 1958- spreading his love for the mission action through the organization of missionary days, triduum and weeks - in many Major and Regional Seminaries, presenting it as being an integral part of the Catholic priesthood.

God blessed this work by giving dozens of vocations, most of whom (over 30) have spent their lives in O.M.I. missions in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Fr. Gaetano has always attributed them to the intercession of Mary.

“Passionate of Christ and of the Church, he has made of the missionary idea the place of all his engagement in the most diverse fields that have seen him engaged.

He could not fulfill his dream of going to the mission ad gentes, but he inflamed hearts and hearts, which through him could evangelize

¹⁰ Vittorio Barbagiovanni, *Una maestrina d'altri tempi*, Armando Siciliano Editore, Messina, 2001, p.101.

immense regions that were waiting for the light of Gospel, from polar lands to Africa.

Fr. Gaetano had a universal soul; he was truly a missionary of all climates. His intelligence was a valid support to his missionary anxiety, allowing him to be convincing when he met young seminarians and shared with them the spirit of the Mission.

How many Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who have run the slopes of the Mission, who have spent their life for the Kingdom and continue to spend it, owe to that missionary 'black beard', the discovery of their missionary vocation!

Fr. Gaetano, many of these missionary priests have welcomed you to heaven, and how many are crying for you here on earth, and will keep an unforgettable memory of you.

*In this work, you were like a fisherman, patient and persevering.*¹¹

From 1949 to 1973, he was a member of several O.M.I. communities (Roma Prefetti from September 26 1953, Pescara Santuario from October 2 1958, Pescara S. Andrea from July 25 1961, Napoli Piazzì from October 1963, S. Prisco (CE) from March 1965, Roma Prefetti from July 1965) while maintaining the same position as Provincial Director of AMMI.

In addition to this, he was appointed the Superior of the Community from September 9, 1953 to October 1, 1958 and Central Assistant of the Oblate Cooperators of Mary Immaculate (COMI), from 1965 until his death.

Besides this, from 1955 to 1958, Fr. Gaetano assumes the position of Director Responsible for the O.M.I missionary magazine "*Voce di Maria - Fino al Polo*"¹²

¹¹ From the homily of the General Superior OMI, hold at the funeral of Fr. Gaetano Liuzzo OMI on November 17, 2003 in Vermicino di Frascati (RM) in *Comunicazioni*, n. 5, Oblate Cooperators of Mary Immaculate, (C.O.M.I.) Rome, November 20, 2003, p. 13-14.

¹² Cfr. *Missioni Omi*, n. 5, Rome, May 1971, p. 17.

As Director of AMMI for Italy, he accomplishes a splendid work organizing and disseminating the Association throughout the peninsula, especially in areas served by O.M.I. and in those parishes where parish missions were done by the Oblates.

He seeks to form true missionary animators with oblate spirit, leveraging on the Christian vocation that is, by itself, missionary in virtue of baptism.

One of his greatest joys is just to read in the documents produced by the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*, the same fundamental ideas he had insisted over the past fifteen years.

Working with the laity, he founded the "Oblate Sisters" movement in 1951. The inspiration came to him from the wish, though generic, contained in the 182 circular letter from Father Leo Deschatelets, Superior General of the O.M.I, who was hoping for an army of missionary laity to work together with the Congregation.

“I remember with a sense of emotion the early months of 1951. The Father General's circular letter on AMMI made me think about the possibility of starting something that would air out, in a modern way, the Third Orders for the ancient Institutes. That is, a 'movement' among the 'zealous' that made them more 'daughters' of the Congregation, especially with a more vivid oblate spirit expressing and favoring their missionary work.

And unexpectedly, a double external voice from two groups of young 'zealous', distant and unknown to each other, told me: 'We want to be better LIKE THE OBLATES'. A sign from Heaven !?

My answer? 'Let us pray! At the beginning of the retreat, write it down on a note. And I will answer'.

During the retreat - it was the first of three full days - I answered: 'to become a full oblate on a secular dress (this was an expression used by Father General for the most committed members of

AMMI). *Indeed becoming 'Sisters' of the OMI (hence the first name of Oblate Sisters).*"¹³

While conducting the spiritual exercises of the animators ("zealous"), he proposes to create within the AMI, a group strongly committed to take on the oblate spirit with its four fundamental points: christocentrism, marianisation, charity-fraternity and missionary zeal. The members of the group could freely take votes, but the group should be lay and missionary in the strict sense of cooperation / missionary animation and mission service.

About half of the members joined and so on August 22, 1951 they lay the foundations of the future COMI Institute, which, it will be said later, is the most beautiful flower of the Italian AMMI.

Vannina Castellano, one of the participants, remembers the event as follows:" ... *The eyes remained intent, revealing that the soul had not interrupted the work in its three phases: purification, elevation, and irradiation. Moreover, through these three topics we came to the sweet invitation of Barba Bianca (Fr. Gaetano, ndr): Full participation in the life of the Oblates. The Congregation opened its arms to us, put at our disposal all its treasure of merit and in return, we offered through the hands of Mary that little we are, we have, and we hope. And on August 22, 16 of us became Oblate Sisters pronouncing the consecration formula in the church of SS. Annunziata, in front of the celebrated and miraculous Annunciation of the 12th Century, that we discovered for the occasion.*"¹⁴

Since then, and for over twenty years, Fr. Gaetano consecrated his activities as a priest and missionary animator to the AMMI Association and to this movement that over time will become a Secular Institute.

¹³ Gaetano Liuzzo, *Circolare n. 018 – Regole*, Roma, Settembre 1985, Archivio COMI, pag. 2.

¹⁴ Nella Famiglia AMMI: Echi del ritiro delle zelatrici in *Voce di Maria*, Anno XXX, n. 10, Rome, December 1951, p. 147

His work was supported by the Father General of the OMI who, indirectly, had stimulate it and, in the early years from Fr. Felice Cappello S.J., considered “*the Saint of Rome*.”¹⁵

On January 17, 1973, p. Gaetano is transferred to the Provincialate House O.M.I. in Rome with the duties of Vicar, Secretary, and Provincial Archivist. On October 10, 1975, he became also Treasurer and Superior of the House, mandate that was renewed for a three-year period on October 12, 1976.

*“In all these tasks carried out with generosity and with a profound spirit of obedience Fr. Liuzzo Gaetano has made a great service not only to the undersigned during his term of office, but also to the entire Italian Province O.M.I. with his competence, discretion, obedience and with his supernatural spirit. In the community, he was an exemplary religious, always obedient to the local superior and the major superiors...”*¹⁶

From August 8, 1977, he returned to Roma Prefetti as editor-in-chief of the magazine “Missioni OMI” and in 1989, he was appointed as Administrator ad interim, the charge that was renewed on March 6, 1996.

In 2001, because of an injury (femur breakage) and a hospital stay, he was re-transferred to the Provincialate House in Vermicino di Frascati (RM) for a period of convalescence. He was then assigned, on November 9, 2002, to the community of S. Giorgio Canavese (TO). He died there on November 14, 2003 at 8.15 am. The funeral ceremonies took place in the Provincialate in Vermicino di Frascati (RM) on November 17, 2003. His body rests in the grave O.M.I. in the cemetery of Marino (RM) alongside with other oblate brothers and sisters.

¹⁵ Gaetano LIUZZO, *Circolare alle COMI e agli Ausiliari*, Rome, February 14, 1993, COMI Archives.

¹⁶ From the testimony of Fr. Remigio Salzillo, ex Provincial Superior O.M.I., COMI Archives.

In the Mass of Suffrage celebrated on November 15, 2003 in S. Giorgio Canavese, the Superior of his last community, Fr. Fortunato Muffolini OMI, remembered as follows:

*“He was the man of the Holy Spirit; He has always looked at Jesus as the Savior of all mankind. His strong desire was to make him known to the people, to whom he carefully followed the journey without ever forcing their steps but pushing them to Jesus.”*¹⁷

¹⁷ *Comunicazioni*, n. 5, Oblate Cooperators of Mary Immaculate, (C.O.M.I.), Rome, November 20, 2003, p. 2.