

*Vannina Castellano: one of the firsts Oblate Cooperators of Mary
Immaculate who worked closely with P. Gaetano Liuzzo OMI for the birth
of Institute C.O.M.I; and founder of the NGO
“Cooperation with the developing world - COMI”*

**Short biographical notes and selected memories from some friends,
relatives and COMI’s Sisters, extracts from the book**

“In the secret of the heart”

by

Rolando Polzelli

Vannina Castellano was born in S. Eusanio del Sangro (Chieti – Italy) from Giulio Castellano and Maria de Nobili, the 1st of September, 1924.

She followed the cultural footprints of her the parents, both schoolteachers and attends the normal school of the Orsoline Sisters in Chieti.

Vannina for all her life, worked as an elementary teacher. She promotes extra-curricular initiatives and both religious and civic education of young people by helping families in need, through free and personal commitment.

From October 1968, she left her town and move to Villalba di Guidonia (Rome) to remain at the complete disposal of her Institute. There, she continued to teach in the elementary school of the nearby city of Bagni di Tivoli, today called Tivoli Terme (Rome), and stayed between Villalba and Rome until 1979, when she returned to his town to stay until his death on March 10, 1987.

Broadly, the story of the many aspects of Vannina Castellano's life is entwined with the launch of initiatives and the foundation of larger and new realities. Vannina was a 'silent' protagonist, humble and determined, who collaborated closely with father Gaetano Luizzo OMI and Aurora Stoppelli, to the birth of The Secular Institute of the Oblates Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and subsequently founded the NGO COMI, for the implementation of projects and sending volunteers abroad.

She was a woman of deep faith and spirituality that remained in the heart of all those who have known her, not only for her great kindness but also because of her many virtues.

Carmela Santagata, president of the C.O.M.I from 1974 to 1983 remembers her as follows:

“I think the characteristic of Vannina can be synthesized in these elements: a great love for the Institute, so much devotion to "Mary of Nazareth", a great “veneration” for the Founding Father, and central assistant. Her goodness of heart, obedience, full availability, great patience in accepting physical suffering, calm in speaking and listening (I never saw her angry); a great love for her native village, a great love for the sisters in mission”.

Here are some of her significant words from a letter to the Institute:

“God wants His work and to accomplish it, he uses the Father as a tool and uses us as a matter. Therefore, I am a little grain needed to make this brick for the building of his Church. It must be a good, compact grain, which blends with the others and feels fine in its place. I cannot and do not want to be the grain that crumbles and goes on its own, compromising the stability of the brick and the entire construction. I thought like this and I think like this from then on, and is for this mentality that I always wanted to know as much as possible about the family. I felt and I feel, directly responsible for everything that is happening in it, not just for the circulation of grace, but also as a participation in thoughts, responsibility, and activity, everything that pertains to it. That is why I think of some initiatives and I agree to pay in person, when and how the situation requires it.”

*Short biographical notes and selected memories from some friends, relatives
and COMI's Sisters,*

Bruno Basti

The vital characteristic of Auntie Vivì was her determination: when she had an objective, she broke the barriers. She used to spend hours and hours praying. In prayer, she used to acquire the strength and the light, to attract with charity and sharing, people's hearts.

Her house in Sant'Eusanio has been often the meeting place for young people in difficulty: there, have found assistance, young people in poverty, former drug-addicted and "normal" kids. Young people, in the search of listening and advising, needing respect and human warmth. Gathered in this house, like in a club where they could talk about them, their experiences, and the causes of their mistakes, driven by the desire to be better and to engage daily to overcome their personal sufferings.

Auntie was passionate about their lives, alongside them in the tough challenges they were facing. She used to involve them in social but also recreational projects so much that at the end this young people often became others' young person's supporters. Auntie Vivi, with care and attention to the sensitivities of each one, was able to gather young people, giving them an address of faith and courage in the future. The results of his commitment are still visible. Her commitment to the Third World, especially to Chad, was also extraordinary and effective. She made use of all her resources to help convey help in this direction, thanks also to the support and availability of her collaborators. She had the missionary dream. For this reason, she drafted a difficult and ambitious project to allow the foundation to be recognized even for missionary purposes, overcoming bureaucratic and relevant economic difficulties.

I think that this is the reason why, those who shared with her some of her life, still remember her, thirty years after her death. For her struggle against poverty, hunger in the world, illness, loneliness, ignorance, and drugs. With C.O.M.I. she has made perennial works. She has spent her life, without ever losing sight of the dimension of the fellow man, a difficult example to imitate!

Patrizia Basti

Dear Rolando, time sweeps away so many memories, but not those that mark your life! She was Vannina Castellano for people, but for us his nephews, she was Auntie Vivì, prodigal of altruism. During my childhood, I remember trying to attract her attention in all ways, I understood she had so much to offer to me, but she always had so many commitments and people to meet. I would have wanted to stop the clock's hands and having her all for me! As a child, I had an insatiable jealousy towards all those who prevented me from enjoying her. However, Auntie Vivi, in those brief periods of time and in spite of our distance, was filling that need of affection. She possessed the key of my heart and from what I have seen and heard I believe she had the ability to enter people's heart, always approaching them with extreme delicacy and kindness. I keep in memory the light of her eyes, her warm and enveloping smile and the caress of her words. I thank God for having had her in my life! I am convinced that many people have been encouraged by her to live on the side of good. Auntie Vivi has been a gift!

Maria Alessandra Bonetti

My thoughts often go to Vannina, and all the time we have spent together in Via Tarra. I have had a very deep friendship with her. On the one hand, because we were both teachers and able to communicate very much about the subject, and on the other hand, because of our very strong and intense communication about the life of our institute.

She used to meet often with P. Liuzzo with whom she had a friendship and not just a filiation: a really strong and special relationship, I think she used to tell him everything. In fact, she spoke first to him, and not to me, about her illness, even though we were there to assist her.

Don Salvatore Cassata

At the beginning of the 1970s, I had a post for the workers' pastoral and together with the first base community, composed of all the young people; we were engaged in a study of our area, with a research institute. Vannina Castellano was also a member of the community who worked with me to train and build the group of young people. She liked to work as a group, all together.

We used to meet regularly to deal with issues of some depth, starting from the reading of a text of the Gospel; and then each one said their own experience, reflection or thought to build together the desired deepening. Vannina was like everyone else without ever having the air of an older, more mature person. She preferred to reason together rather than catechize. However, I noticed that she had a particular imprint, a life's choice of a consecrated person who carried in his breast and gave his soul to the group.

Her objective was the mission and that is why she lived with a spirit of poverty.

What kind of woman was she? She used to live for the others more than for herself, she had a spirit of donation and poverty; she saved for the poor.

She participated as everyone in the group's activities in a normal way. Normal things do not arise from a sense of normal life, you need to see who lives them and how. Sometimes they are signs of a choice. In her case, I can say that all these things belonged to her as a person, as a conquest, as a way of being.

Father Espedito Iammarino OMI, priest of Villalba di Guidonia (RM), had called her for the parish poor's and she had opened a small office where she used to hear the people and their needs to try to find a solution. Vannina was interested in us, in the parish, and the mission of her Institute. I have been trying to look for one of the files of those days, but I did not find anything. Normal people are like that, more than writing to people, they prefer to dialogue with them.

Maria Rosaria Citarella

I lived in Vannina's community in Rome, via Tarra, although for a time she continued to go to Villaba (RM). My remembrance of Vannina is that of a strong, determined person and always in activity. She was committed to generating something more solid than an association, which contained a true fraternity inside.

She had married the missionary cause of the OMIs, therefore ours, and she gave herself to it.

She got on extremely well with Fr Liuzzo from the first moments.

The Lord gave her so many gifts: beautiful intelligence, ease of expression, liveliness of thoughts, and a great cultural preparation. She knew how to communicate and move well with people, and how to commit her circle of friendships and interests to the missionary cause. She would have wanted to be in the front row in the mission, but family issues first, and then, health problems, did not allow it.

Tina Consalvi

I have been Vannina's pupil from the first year of the elementary school. She was a serious, severe but also a simple and spontaneous teacher. She was also a very generous person and did the good without showing it or make people feel guilty.

At that time, a paid exam was required, at the end of elementary school, to access the next cycle. She let me give the exam free because she was a daddy's friend, but she did the same for many pupils. She knew they could not afford it, so she used to tell them not to worry about because the exam had already been paid.

Vannina was generous with everyone, without exceptions, but she used to do everything in the most absolute secret to avoid any gossip.

Among other things, I know that she supported the studies of two boys who became Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate. She was always waiting for her pension, to support a charity in Uruguay where her friend Andreina Gambardella was a missionary.

As a young Vannina, she was a sober, lively, sociable, spirited girl with the right touch of clever irony, because she was a very smart person.

Lucia Cremona

I lived in community with Vannina in Rome, in via Tarra, during the short periods I was returning from the mission in the 1970s, and later when she used to come back from her village to attend the Forlanini hospital.

Vannina was centered on the secular vocation, she expressed it totally; she was a person particularly attentive to social issues.

I shared with her the habit of reading the newspaper; I often found her in the evening with the newspaper open on the table, kneeling on the chair to read it carefully. With her, I had a full understanding; we really loved each other.

At that time, we had the habit of doing adoration at home on the retreat days. We used to go together in the living room and put the Eucharist on the bench to adore it each in turn. One of us used to fast to continue the adoration even during lunchtime.

To avoid disturbing, Vannina used to sometimes, go out for smoking and chatting with the boys gathered to a nearby wall. Once I went at her home in S.Eusanio, with the friends of COMI and father Giuseppe Cellicci OMI to attend a gathering. She was delighted to have us there and the coexistence was beautiful; Fr. Joseph made profound and touching meditations.

Rita Dell'Osa

I came to Saint Eusanio in 1976 but I only met Vannina a few years later. Once in his frank and direct way she stopped on my way to ask me why I did not attend Sunday Mass. I told her briefly about my story and the difficulty I had as a separated woman. I had been sixteen years without the sacrament of penance, and the only time I have had the courage to approach myself, I had not obtained an absolution, but a simple blessing. I did not understand this behavior and I get even angrier with the Church and priests.

Vannina, who little by little came to know me better, and could not endure that I remain in an unresolved spiritual situation, had the idea to introduce me to a missionary. He listened to me so attentively and with such a great participation, telling me his family's experiences, that he triggers an uninterrupted flood of tears that helped me to get out of my heart of all the evil I had endured before.

I still cried for a week before totally liberating my heart. Vannina was a beautiful person, she had a great faith and she did all she could for everybody, especially for young people. She used to receive at her home a group of girls with whom she talked about everything and commented on the Gospel, thus contributing to their human and Christian formation. She also used to do catechism or free after-school activity, if someone needed it.

For the last few years of her life she was sick and lived alone, and I did not have the courage to leave her in this situation until she died. I used to visit her every day to accompany her and see if she needed something. Matilde Grantigliano and I, who used to make turns to help her for daily business, noticed that Vannina's life, who had always been sober, had become very poor, reduced to the essentials. The only expense she did for her was for cigarettes; all she saved was for the missions.

Andreina Gambardella

I find myself in the hands the picture of Vannina and without realizing it; the memories begin to pass before my mind. The first time I met Vannina was at the beginning of my journey among the COMI's, during a retreat. She was with the other older sisters and, at that time, for respect, fear and timidity, our knowledge was limited. Later, other sisters talked to me about her, her liveliness, her ability to be with the young and love them.

Hence, all her commitment to accepting a challenge, offering them also the opportunity to make a missionary experience through volunteer service as an alternative to the military one.

This intuition seemed so brilliant to me: creating or supporting the birth of a volunteer organization with an "oblato" soul. I began to appreciate it, to grasp what was bigger than appearances, in that smile that was at the same time simple and a bit shrewd. I knew that inside of her there were many hidden gifts: a lively intelligence and great sensitivity, combined with a good missionary enthusiasm. The last encounters with Vannina took place during hospitalization for her illness.

I had the chance to spend much time with her; she talked to me of its times, of P. Liuzzo, but she was also interested in me, as I of what I was doing for my preparation for the mission.

She kept the sense of humor with which she calmed everyone and helped her live the limits of the illness that were showing. I remember that one day, helping her change her position, she had beaten her head on the bedside. In the face of my concern, she replied, "Remember that I am from *Molise*, I have a hard head like you, like Calabrian, or maybe more than you!" We have laughed heartily; perhaps her "tough head" was rather a great tenacity, passion, believe in God's Love that makes everything possible, believe it for her and others, for all those young people who over the years have been able to devote time, energy and themselves in service to the brothers, through the Comi.

Rita Polzelli

I keep her memory in my heart for all she has loved me from the first moment. In our little vacations at his home, we were surrounded by delicacies and typical meals from Abruzzo. We used to talk about our nascent married life and everyday difficulties and she was always there to listen and support us. She proudly introduced us to his friends and made us feel almost as if we were her children.

When I saw her relatives, after a certain time, I was moved, because in each of them I found some of her. Thanks, Vannina!

Fernando (also known as Nando) Sisti

It happens that at certain times of your life, when you are living a captivating present, you do not have the perception of its scope and dimension, that somehow leaves a mark on you, regardless of your will. As far as I am concerned, it is more or less, what happened to me during my twenties, when I Met Vannina. I hope I can give a flash of a period that lasted more than a few years, without falling into rhetoric and sentimentalism because I believe our meeting has a substance that deserves more, even if I cannot evaluate its scope.

It was the seventies, I attended college, but beyond the study, I had interests that led me to live the social anxieties of the period, which went beyond the research of the fun at all costs, that is often linked to this age. All this led me to put my nose in environments where we talked about political commitment, the fellow man, social justice, poverty, and why not, spirituality. The latter may be a legacy of a brilliant altar boy career, long forgotten.

In this looking around me, I met a priest who suggested me the experience of some priests tied to the liberation theology, who had lived in Latin America. Their exposition was, in fact, an invitation to a journey of this kind with strong reference to the Gospel and Vatican II.

The fire at that age is a real risk that did not spare my person and some others who had come to know the same things. Certainly, it was a fire in a haystack, made up of young people, who wanted to look around them, and in fact, this gave birth to a base community in an extra-parochial environment. The sincere aim of this community was, at least in their intent, to make a journey oriented to the testimony of the Gospel, beginning with the discovery of the consistency of their faith outside structured contexts having connotations challenged by most of them. All this gave the naive feeling of freedom from what seemed far from young people in the ecclesial context.

Is in this scenario that the relationship with Vannina was born. The pastor who was particularly worried about this group (extra-parish), had the happy idea of proposing to Vannina to come to the group, I do not know with what goals.

Honestly, I have to say that I do not know whether this mandate has really existed or whether Vannina himself, sharing the fears of the pastor, had taken this personal decision. After having known better her, I believe more it was a personal decision because all that had to do with a minimal sentiment of mission and involvement led her to a direct engagement. The fact is that a beautiful day, an almost old lady, breathless and not only in the aspect, with a serene and impertinent smile, knocked on the room' door of a private house, where we were used to gathering.

At first, it was almost inevitable that we felt her presence as an intrusion, and what was disarming was her absolute serenity in that situation. In fact, it was voluntarily or involuntarily, the first test of coherence of the group with respect to our openness, which was meant to be unprejudiced. I was personally struck by the fact that her interventions constantly refer to the Gospel and to the faith, in a perspective of commitment to practical life, in the smallest things, in order to overcome dominant selfishness. We began to evaluate with her how to find real intervention contexts in which to express solidarity. She certainly contributed to the discovery of authenticity and consistency with the Evangelical message.

Soon we all considered her, as being an integral part of the group with no problem regarding her well-known affiliation to the COMI.

Her word was always reassuring and she took good care not to intervene to extinguish the fire that arose for a yes or a no: In fact, she led us to make decisions and especially to have weighted internal positions, on what together we deepened in readings.

Soon the specificity of Vannina in the group disappeared. I do not know if by her own merit, or by the fact we became more mature, or for both reasons, but after a few years the group decided to open up and put his service (maybe the word service is too much pretentious) in the confluence of

the parish group where, among other things, I met my wife. After the initial difficulties, an intense period began for everyone, including significant moments of aggregation such as Grottaferrata and Sapri. An intense period for everyone, even for those who do not attend certain contexts anymore.

Those who are outside Italy and wish to receive the book of Rolando Polzelli "Nel segreto del cuore" pp.128, text in Italian, can contact the author directly, by e-mail: rpolzelli@gmail.com