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BLESSED
GENNARO MARIA
SARNELLI
THE CONSCIENCE OF A NATION

His Life and Letters
Edited and Translated by

J. ROBERT FENILI, CSSR



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CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF BLESSED GENNARO SARNELLI

- 1702: September 12, Naples: birth of Gennaro Maria Sarnelli.
September 14, Church of St. Anna de Palazzo, Naples: baptism.
- 1716: Sought admittance to Society of Jesus, but he was too young.
- 1722: Completed degrees in canon and civil law.
- 1728: September: Ended law practice; entered seminary.
- 1729: June 4: Moved into residence of Holy Family (Chinese College).
- 1730: June 5 to May 28, 1731: Novitiate with Congregation of the Apostolic Missions.
- 1731: December 22: Ordination to the diaconate.
- 1732: June 8: Ordination to the priesthood.
- 1733: June: Joined Alphonsus Liguori at Scala.
- 1734: January 15: admitted to Congregation of the Most Holy Savior (Redemptorists).
- 1736: Returned to Naples for medical care because of sickness.
- 1741–1744: Planned and participated with Alphonsus in the mission to the villages, a vast preaching program throughout the area of Naples.
- 1744: April: became too sick to continue preaching, returned to Naples.
June 30, Naples: died at age 41 years, 9 months, and 18 days.
- 1861: Cause for canonization introduced.
- 1906: December 2: Declared “Venerable” by Pope St. Pius X.
- 1996: May 12: Beatified by St. John Paul II.
June 27: Annual Optional Memorial of Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli, CSsR

CHAPTER ONE

A Summary of the Life of the Servant of God

GENNARO MARIA SARNELLI

of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer

By Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, CSsR¹

HIS BIRTH, INFANCY, AND YOUTH

[*Trans. note: Section headings were not in the original.*] Father Don Gennaro Maria Sarnelli was born in Naples on September 12, 1702. His parents were Signor Don Angelo Sarnelli, the Baron of the Land of Ciorani, and Lady Donna Caterina Scoppa. They had eight children, six boys and two girls; of these, Don Gennaro Maria was the fourth son. The fifth son was Signor Don Andrea, a secular priest who is still alive and who, with great edification and public service, used his income to establish on his estate of the aforementioned Ciorani, a house of missionary priests who go about the diocese of Salerno and other areas helping the impoverished people of the Campagna [*Trans. note: That is, the group that was to become the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists).*]

From his earliest days, Gennaro Maria tended toward piety and the Christian virtues to such an extent that even then his modesty was so outstanding that he kept his eyes cast down even in the presence of his sisters and his own mother as well. His obedience and reverence toward his parents was so thorough that if it happened they became annoyed at him, he immediately sought their pardon, kissing their hand and at times even kneeling to calm them. Likewise, his mortifications were numerous from his very childhood, since even then he would deprive himself of fresh fruit. If he was at his home, which faced [the Church of] St. Francis Xavier, when some great festivities were being held he would

¹ S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori, *Compendio*. Alphonsus wrote this work shortly after Sarnelli's death to be published for the Congregation of the Apostolic Missions; but it was not published until 1752, in the fourth edition of Sarnelli's *Il Mondo santificato*.

leave the house in order to avoid gaping at the carriages and cavalcades and attending the receptions. So from all this, we can easily deduce that, right from his youth and throughout his entire life, as we shall narrate, he preserved his baptismal innocence.

At the age of fourteen, he ardently begged his father to allow him to leave secular life and to join the Company of Jesus in order to give himself entirely to God, but he was not permitted to do so because he was not yet old enough for this type of decision. But this did not interfere with his seeking to be more devout, more solitary, and more fervent in his prayers. He would not spend his time with schoolmates of his own age and interests, but because he loved solitude he would hurry from his classes to enter a church and there pass a great deal of time before the Blessed Sacrament, begging the Lord to reveal to him what status he wanted him to choose. Then he would go home, where he lived such an exemplary life with his whole family that there was no evidence he bore any grudges.

FROM LAW CAREER TO CHURCH VOCATION

At his father's insistence, he entered the law profession, and he advanced even as a young man, becoming the counsel for the [*Agency for the*] Provisioning of Salt as well as for His Lordship, the Duke of Cirifalco. But even amid all these occupations, he did not omit his attendance at Mass, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, or his dedication to mental prayer, which he so loved that when he was not busy elsewhere he would go to spend long periods of time in the Church of St. Francis Xavier. This practice was such that when someone came looking for him and he was not at home, the servants, aware of his customary behavior, [*would say*], "Go over to St. Francis Xavier; you will find him there." When he went to relax on his father's estate, he would spend the day in the parish church, and there he would pass a long time in solitary prayer.

Also at this time, several days a week, he would go to care for the sick at the Hospital of the Incurables. He said that it was there that he found himself surrounded by all of God's lights, to the point that, as he said, the hospital served as a continuous meditation and he left there completely at peace with himself and filled with God. Here it was that he finally was called by the Lord to give up the secular world. In effect, it was then that, with his spiritual director's advice, he decided to give up the practice of law and to become a priest so he

could dedicate himself totally to God's service. Thus he put on clerical attire, took himself completely away from secular matters, and donated whatever money he had in reserve as alms to the poor along with all his secular clothing. He dedicated his whole life to God, spending his days in prayer and in the studies necessary to become a priest, as well as in charitable works for the good of his neighbor.

Then, to live a quieter life further from secular disturbances, he retired to the Residence of the Venerable Congregation of the Holy Family in Naples, called the Chinese Residence, where some pious priests lived an exemplary life to the great edification of the whole city. While he stayed there, he spent his time only in prayer or study or in teaching catechism in the neighborhood, as well as frequenting several times a week the Hospital where he would spend as long as six hours at a time consoling, attending to and instructing the impoverished sick there.

During this period, he joined the Venerable Congregation of the Apostolic Missions established in the Archdiocese of Naples to participate in the Holy Missions. Later, when he was ordained, he conducted these with great inspiration and public success, as we shall see.

ENTERING THE REDEMPTORIST CONGREGATION

After some years, he heard of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, founded a few years earlier, in the city of Scala in 1732 under the direction of Monsignor Falcoia, the Bishop of Castellammare. Learning that the purpose of this Congregation was to devote itself to the care of the abandoned people of the Campagna by means of missions and other spiritual exercises, and that in this Institute life was lived with strict regular observance obligated by the simple vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity together with a vow of perseverance, out of a desire for greater perfection he decided to dedicate and to consecrate himself exclusively to God. After consulting Father Manulio, the Jesuit who died a few years ago with a reputation of great sanctity, Gennaro Maria joined this above-mentioned Congregation and moved from Naples to Scala without, however, resigning from the above-mentioned Congregation of the Apostolic Mission. He continued to be a member and to assist in all of its zealous works. He lived there for a few years, giving to all an excellent example in the practice of the virtues, especially by his mortification, charity to his neighbor and obedience. (His response to the bell [*for community activities*] was such that if he

was writing, he would immediately rise from the table even leaving a word unfinished.)

APOSTOLATE IN NAPLES

Then due to his failing health, since the climate did not agree with him and also because he had to care for the extraordinary work he was directing, especially that of removing the prostitutes from the center of the City of Naples, a work in which he had long been involved and which demanded his continual attention, it was necessary for his superiors to give him permission to return to Naples, where he later died. However, even though he lived in Naples, he did not hesitate every so often to come help his confreres in the Congregation with their missions.

In Naples, in addition to his work among the prostitutes, he involved himself in helping people so zealously that His Eminence, Cardinal Spinelli, currently Archbishop of Naples, insisted that Don Gennaro Maria be one of the confreres to accompany Father Don Alphonsus de Liguori, the Rector Major of the above-mentioned Congregation, in a missionary campaign in the environs of the city that the Cardinal had appointed [*Alphonsus to head.*] For this reason, the Cardinal had assigned them a permanent lodging in the vicinity of the village of S. Jorio, in the area called St. Agnello, so that they could move around the other villages near Naples giving missions at the expense of the Eminent Archbishop. When Father Don Alphonsus had to leave the Diocese of Naples because of the business of his Congregation, the Lord Cardinal left the task of directing all the missions in the villages to Father Don Gennaro Maria. He continued the work, at first, with the help of Signor Don Matteo Testa, an excellent missionary, as is well known, and who is today a most worthy Canon of the Archbishopric of Naples. Don Gennaro Maria continued to carry out these missions to the immense profit of the people right up to his death that occurred in Naples a few years later [*His death caused*] great sorrow not only for the very zealous Pastor but for the whole city, who wept over the death of such a great worker in the Vineyard of the Lord. It was said, as is still repeated, that by himself he was worth more than ten missionaries.

SARNELLI'S LOVE OF PRAYER

Before moving on to tell of his remarkable death, it is valuable to convey in a few words some of the rather special aspects of his virtues that are worth noting. He was such a lover of prayer that even as he lived a secular life and was employed in the law profession, whenever he found himself free of business, he would leave his home and go to pray in some church, as we said above. But once he took up the ecclesiastical career, he dedicated himself wholly to that holy practice. During the day, he especially frequented the Church of the Cross near the plaza, where he sat with closed door in a little room behind the sacristy, remaining in prayer from after the midday meal until early evening. He did this almost every day before he moved into the Chinese Residence, except when he went to the Hospital. In prayer he found such great light and heavenly fervor along with an abundance of tears, that, as he later personally confessed, at the beginning of his spiritual life he feared these constant tears would make him lose his sight. The reading from which he gained the greatest light and consolation was that of the Holy Gospels. He used to say that after reading even one verse, he received such an illumination of Divine goodness that he would break into a flood of tears and that, as he would later say, in comparison to this experience, the world was like a handful of chaff.

He was often seen in the cloister of the Church of the Cross and in that of the Holy Spirit walking along, almost beside himself, with open arms and eyes fixed on heaven, breathing forth deep sighs. This was such that some came to consider him out of his mind. When he was once told that because of this he was thought to be crazy, he answered: "That is true; I am crazy because whoever does not love God is crazy and I do not love him." One day he was questioned by a priest as to why he did these things and went around like that. At these words he blushed and replied to his friend that in such moments he was overcome and he sighed without realizing that he did so. From then on, as long as he lived, he would not speak or listen to talk unless it had to do with God and the good of others, and I who am writing bear testimony to this. When he heard idle talk, it pained him, and so he would then try to introduce some spiritual topic or find a polite way to leave the conversation.

HIS WORK AMONG THE PROSTITUTES

It is well known throughout Naples what this zealous worker did to rescue prostitutes from this state of sin. Every feast day he went to the parish of St. Matthew to preach in order to bring these pitiable women to repentance. For this purpose, he was the one who induced the Congregation of the Archbishopric to sponsor annual spiritual exercises in that parish. Then in order to help these poor lost women to maintain themselves, he did not hold back anything that he had in his house, even to the point of going through the city in rags, as we have mentioned. He maintained several women at his own expense, giving each a monthly subsidy so they could stop selling their honor and their souls. He not only managed to help these who came to him but went about searching all through Naples where there might be some to be saved from sin. Among these, he placed sixteen in conservatories and for many he managed to find a husband. In particular, there were two that he supported for two years, and then found a place for them to live, providing them with a bed and household goods. Because the costs being incurred were enormous, he could not cover them by his own personal means. In a few years of his work on this project he had spent from five to six hundred ducats.⁶ So he went about seeking alms throughout Naples, not just in religious houses but going to individual homes as well. He felt such repugnance in doing this that he later said he felt he would die of shame, since in this work he not only had to suffer the great awkwardness in making repeated visits, but also the bearing of contempt and insults. He confided to a friend that some people, who at first esteemed and were pleased with him, later would avoid him when they saw him or dismiss him with vile language.

He also suffered indescribable weariness and persecutions in the great undertaking that he began of reducing the prevalence of prostitutes by moving them to a secluded place outside the City of Naples. It was our Don Gennaro Maria's thought that if these notorious women remained spread throughout the quarters of the city as they had, first above the Toledo, at the Duchesse and in other quarters where they were very numerous, there was immense scandal given both to those who

⁶ [At the time, this sum would equal a skilled craftsman's earnings for four or five years. See *The History of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*, ed. by Francisco Chiovaro, Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1996, Vol. I/i, 61].

lived nearby as well as those who passed on the streets. So he decided that there was no other way to remedy this immense evil except by forcing them to live together outside the city. To accomplish this project, God and all Naples know the great amount of trouble it caused him, as well as the large expenses he incurred in having several books printed on the topic of the abuses of prostitution. This undertaking drew down on him the opposition and abuse not only of his enemies but even of friends who judged that he could not succeed in the venture. They tried to dissuade him or laughed at him. But he still remained strong with confidence in God alone and not in human support. He made every effort to convince the principal ministers of the King, our patron, so that he finally experienced the joy of seeing his desire fulfilled. This occurred with the issuance of a nine-section decree sent to the Lord Duke of Giovenazzo, then Regent of the Court of the Vicariate on May 4, 1738. This decree promulgated the banishment of prostitutes who were to leave the city to live in the places designated for them. The royal order was executed with such vigor that those prostitutes who resisted leaving their house had their possessions tossed out the windows. In this way, the City of Naples was relieved of some thirty to forty thousand prostitutes. Some of these found husbands, some were housed in conservatories, and the rest retired to the designated places or simply moved away. But because of this affair, our Don Gennaro Maria suffered many threats to his life and deadly assaults from the lovers of these forlorn women. For this reason his family did not stop trying to impede his efforts out of fear of the harm that could come to him, and because of him to the whole family. Still, he replied that he was ready to suffer any danger and that it would be a blessing if he would even lose his own life because of this work, which gave such glory to God.

His Books

This same zeal for the salvation of others induced him to go to great lengths of suffering in publishing his books. In the material he chose to treat in these books and the spirit in which he wrote them, one can discern his one great desire: to sanctify the whole world if that would be possible. In addition to the above-mentioned book for the City of Naples on the abuses of prostitution, he also wrote another for all the cities and territories of the Kingdom. In this book he demonstrated that

in these lands and in the small cities permission for prostitution was in fact prohibited. This work he sent to all the bishops in the Kingdom. After this, he had published the book titled *Il mondo santificato* (*The Sanctified World*). One could say that, in its own way, it did sanctify the world, since it produced good results in those who got a copy of it in their hands. This is not just a few people, because the book circulated throughout the Kingdom of Naples, and even in other Kingdoms.

Furthermore, he published an entire book against the vice of blasphemy from his desire to see it stamped out, especially in the Kingdom of Naples, where this cursed vice was entrenched. He wrote a treatise, gathered into another book titled *Il mondo riformato* (*The Reformed World*), on respect for the Church, which was something that was also very much lacking in this Kingdom. He also produced a pamphlet on the obligation of parents to educate their children. Another book, meant to give spiritual guidance for pious persons, was titled *la Discrezione de' Spiriti* (*The Discernment of Spirits*). Also, another was for priests with the title *Il ecclesiastico santificato* (*The Sanctified Clergyman*). Another one offered an easy method for all the activities of missions, very useful for priest missionaries. Another work he had printed at the cost of much effort, as he mentions himself, since he composed it while he was suffering and in pain under the burden of the disease of tuberculosis; that finally took his life. It was titled *l'Anima desolata* (*The Desolate Soul*) and was meant to serve persons in spiritual aridity. Another contained very devout meditations and was titled *l'Anima illuminata* (*The Illuminated Soul*). He published other works as well that could be mentioned. He plotted out further works, some of which he had already begun to have printed, such as a treatise on compassion for the souls in purgatory, another on appeasing God at the time of plagues, and finally, one of selected devout reflections for each day of the year. These were left incomplete because his death intervened.

There were still others planned that he had not yet put down on paper: sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary for every Saturday and all her Novenas and a textbook on morals and the truths of Faith. In short, all the books that he wrote or planned to write were composed or designed out of the desire to help people, as he said, even after his death. When he was dying, it was precisely this that he expressed to the Lord Canon Sersale, who had come to visit him: "Lord Canon," he said, "I wish to preach right up to Judgment Day."