

05

## The spiritual experience during the retreat at Castellazzo of Paul Danei (of the Cross)

*Rafael Vivanco, C.P.*

# Jubilaevum

*“Jesus resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem” (Lk 9:51; Is 50.7)*

In the northwest area of the Italian peninsula in the 10th century there was a city called **Gamondio**, whose name resulted from the union of two Latin words: *Gaudium* and *Mundi*, meaning “The Joy of the World”. It is an evocative name-- a place of joy, dreams, well-being and peace. By the seventeenth century it was no longer called Gamondio; rather it was called **Castellazzo**, which means “fortress, fortification”. Gamondio needed a wall to defend itself against invaders. Castellazzo had a facade like flint-- its towers, fortresses, etc. It seems that with the passage of time “Castellazzo” replaced “Gamondio”.

Since 1715 Pablo Danei, from Ovada where he was born in 1694, lived with his family in Castellazzo. In his spirit it seems that Gamondio and Castellazzo intertwined, i.e. the joy of the world and forti-





# Jubilaeum

## FORMATION AND CATECHESIS



fication. Normally the place and environment in which we live influences the configuration of our personality. The desert, the coast, the mountains, the countryside, or the city, etc. imprint a character and mold the people who live in them. Castellazzo with its fortified castle will temper the heart of Paul, who will embark on the difficult journey of austerity and penance in search of Gamondio, the true joy of the world.

In Castellazzo Paul was inspired to gather companions to follow Jesus crucified. As if the environmental context spoke to him about the hard rock of history into which, with “determination” (Lk 9:51) Christ had entered to redeem it. The 40 days of retreat that he spent in the room next to the church of San Carlo (23 November 1720 – 1 January 1721), fresh from the vestition with the habit of penance, in the cold of November and December, nourished with bread and water, he entered into the spiritual climate experienced by Jesus in the desert and on Calvary.

The hermitage of Santo Stefano (St. Stephen), where he spent some time later, also familiarized him with the stones that killed the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:54-60) and who, like Jesus, died forgiv-

ing. The Castellazzo experience hardened Paul Danei's face like flint (Is 50:7).

However, together with Castellazzo, *Gamondio* was still present in the intimate depth of Paul's heart. The joy of the world, the Passover of Christ, the happiness and joy of the Gospel for the world, was evoked in Castellazzo by the free, kind and fraternal figure of St. Francis of Assisi, venerated in the church of the Capuchins, very close to the place where Paul received and conceived the founding inspiration. Another image also permeated his heart, that of Saint Martin of Tours in the church near his home parish. The gesture of the saint who cuts his cloak in half to offer it to warm a poor man was another sign of *Gamondio*, the joy of a world that rediscovers humanity, fraternity, and solidarity.

***What are the places and environments where you have lived that have influenced your life and vocation?***

The experience of the forty-day retreat in Castellazzo was for Paul Danei a crucial, foundational moment, where his personality and vocation matured and where he discovered the values and the





# Jubilaem

## FORMATION AND CATECHESIS



fundamental guidelines that he was to follow. It was a radical experience, a tree trunk from which branches and fruits would sprout. This experience was at the foundation of his life and the life of the Congregation he was to found, including the Rule which he wrote during that retreat (2-7 December) and which, in time, the Church would approve.

In the Spiritual Diary (SD) that Paul wrote during the retreat – of testimonial and inspirational value for us – we discover the main features of his spiritual experience:

In Castellazzo Paul wanted to live the experience of loneliness and silence, the “desert”, like the experience of Moses and the people of Israel; like that of Elijah and that of Jesus. He took time apart to have an authentic encounter and listen to what was happening in his heart; to find God, others, the world and history in its true dimensions (the SD, 23 November).

He had a profound experience of prayer, of encounter with God the Father-Mother and with his Word, which moved him to filial trust, to inner peace, union and spiritual heights with God; a prayer of suffering and purification, with distractions and enlightenment. He made a spiritual journey, moving from the spiritual dark night to the heights of spiritual transformation (November 24; January 1).

He had a profound encounter with himself and his history, as God sees it, with the qualities and opportunities that he had to continue to develop in his search for and acceptance of his personal identity. He wrote: *“I had a special knowledge of myself... knowing myself to be an abyss of ingratitude... I told my Divine Savior that I could call myself nothing other than a miracle of his infinite mercy.”* (SD, 28 December).

He had a profound encounter with Jesus, God crucified, with the feelings of the Lord, with the Sacrament of the Eucharist... Jesus Crucified was the main motive, principle and foundation of his life and into whom he wanted to transform himself. It was a love that wanted to be crucified in order to reach the perfect likeness with the Beloved only by desiring to do God’s will: *“I know that I do not desire to know anything else nor to taste any consolation. I desire only to be crucified with Jesus.”* (SD, 23 November; 27 December).

He lived this whole process in a spirit of poverty:

he speaks of cold, snow, ice; crude clothes and bare feet; scarce food (DE 27 November). And in the spirit of penance-- not only external penance but that which evokes true conversion-- and to do God’s will, to have a life project; to make decisions, discern options, and open paths. When he left the retreat, Paul had a project to which he gave his whole life.

Throughout this spiritual journey, Paul’s concerns for the Church and its needs also emerge-- the conversion of sinners, the reparation of irreverence toward the Church. He wanted to die a martyr where the Eucharist is denied. *“I felt that I would die when I saw the loss of so many souls who do not experience the fruit of the Passion of my Jesus.”* (SD, 4 December; 29 December).

In this spiritual experience the inspiration that Paul had to found *“the great wonder of God”* i.e., the Passionist Congregation, was confirmed-- *“I had a strong impulse to go to Rome”*; *“I asked my Sovereign Good if he wished me to write the Rule for the Poor of Jesus”* (SD, 27 November); *“I had a special tenderness in imploring God in his mercy to found the holy Congregation quickly and to send forth some people for his greater glory and for the good of their neighbors.”* (SD, 7 December). In fact, he wrote the Rule.

When Paul concluded those days of retreat, he laid out the project he wanted to follow in his life-- the foundation of the Congregation of the Passion. He sought the first opportunity to go to Rome to ask the Pope to gather companions and to begin to concretely carry out the God-inspired project. He was inspired with deep hope, beyond what he could have imagined-- efforts and work, disappointments and rejections, quests and achievements, the result of his identification with Jesus Crucified.

***What was the foundational experience that gives meaning to and inspires your life and vocation?***

***What are the fruits that stem from it? What is still needed?***

