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# Discovering America: Father Raphael Piperni and the First Salesian Missionaries in North America

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A young Italian immigrant, Angelo Petazzi, watched anxiously as the English steamship, the *Werra*, approached New York harbor. Clutched in his hand was a letter from the then Salesian superior general, Father Michael Rua, which informed him of the impending arrival of a group of four Salesians in New York. At their head was Father Raphael Piperni. In the early afternoon, of the first week of March, the *Werra*, docked in New York harbor.

Don Rua's letter requested young Petazzi to serve as a welcoming committee-of-one, and to greet the small band of Salesian missionaries in his name. It further asked him to escort the group across the continent to their destination in San Francisco, California.

Anselmo quickly identified the group as they descended the gangplank. The youth introduced himself and proffered the letter of introduction to the obvious leader of the four, Father Raphael Piperni.

“Are you the Mr. Anselmo Petazzi this letter speaks of?”

“Yes, Father, I am.”

“From your speech, sir, I take it that you are Italian.”

“Yes, Father, I am. But I wish you would drop all this formality. Just call me, Anselmo.”

With a sigh of relief the priest embraced the youth.

“My dear Anselmo, you have no idea how glad I am to see you. Father Rua writes that you will be our guide to San Francisco, then?”

“I came down from Boston last week just for that purpose. I have been waiting for your arrival for the past week. Yes, I have every intention of escorting you to California.”

“Son, your meeting us here puts my mind at ease. Later, during our trip, I hope you will tell me all about yourself so I can get to know you better.”<sup>1</sup>

Two weeks later, shortly after his arrival in San Francisco, Fr. Piperni would write an account of his eighteen-day Atlantic crossing and his transcontinental train trip for the *Bolletino Salesiano*. The sea voyage had gone swimmingly (*nostro viaggio fù felicissimo*). Moreover, the group was spared the long grueling processing at Ellis Island, “Because we were missionaries and therefore were not considered immigrants. So we did not have to put up with all that troublesome routine.”

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<sup>1</sup> For too long Anselmo Petazzi, the twenty-year-old youth who introduced himself to Fr. Piperni that March day in New York in 1897, has been the unsung hero of the Salesians’ arrival in North America. Anselmo Petazzi (1877-1941) had emigrated to Boston three years earlier from the small town of Menaggio, near Lake Como. Like thousands of other eager immigrants who had come to the New World, he too had hoped to find fame and fortune awaiting him. He was quickly disillusioned. What he did find were Boston’s mean streets and back alleys where he survived for three years peddling fruit from a pushcart. It was during this period that he chanced upon a copy of the *Bolletino Salesiano* which described Don Bosco’s work among the poor children of Turin. Witnessing firsthand the plight of the numerous homeless and abandoned children who roamed the streets of Boston he was able to relate to Don Bosco’s experiences in the Piedmontese capital. Writing to the editor of the *Bolletino* he requested more information about Don Bosco’s work and at the same time described the deplorable conditions surrounding the children at risk in the city of Boston. He then strongly urged that the Salesians should carry on the work of their founder in Boston. By chance Don Rua came upon Petazzi’s letter and sent the young immigrant his personal reply. This opened up a line of communication between peddler and priest, and their correspondence continued for two years. Realizing that Anselmo was the right man in the right place at the right time, Rua asked the youth to meet the steamship that was carrying the first Salesian missionaries to the United States. For the dialog that ensued between Petazzi and Fr. Piperni see Ruffilo Uguccioni’s *Un missionario di tre continenti, Don Raffaele Piperni, Salesiano* (SEI, Torino, 1949), 66-67. This uncritical but very readable biographical sketch of Fr. Piperni is the only extant biography in print of this zealous missionary whose travels spanned three continents. Father Uguccioni (1891-1949) was a popular and prolific author. It is especially as a playwright that he is best remembered. He authored more than fifty plays and during the 1940s and 1950s they were staged in numerous Salesian theaters throughout the world.

The train trip from New York to San Francisco which included a two-day stopover in Chicago, lasted 10 days. Though it was still winter, the passengers experienced no discomfort. "We did not feel the cold at all since the spacious coaches were well heated by steam," Piperni wrote later. But the purple mountains and the fruited plains obviously left no lasting impressions: "...most of our trip through desert and snow-covered mountains was somewhat boring."<sup>2</sup>

Waiting for the group in San Francisco was the pastor of the Italian church of SS. Peter and Paul, Fr. Raphael De Carolis. Their meeting was a cordial one, but it was not a presage of things to come. On the following day, March 13, the two priests were ushered into the presence of Patrick W. Riordan, archbishop of San Francisco.<sup>3</sup> The historic meeting took place in his chancery office at 1100 Franklin Street.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The June 1897 issue of the *Bolletino Salesiano* (pp. 150-151), published in Turin, carried Fr. Piperni's brief account of his group's ocean voyage and the train trip to San Francisco that followed. In the *Bolletino* version the weary traveler notes that the missionary band reached San Francisco on the morning of March 12. Other documents and Fr. Piperni's own later writings affirm that the date of arrival in San Francisco was March 11.

Since the train terminal was at the old Southern Pacific Station in Oakland, California, perhaps the travel-weary group decided to spend the night of their arrival in Oakland and then proceed into San Francisco by ferry on the following morning, thereby arriving there on March 12. There was no direct train access into San Francisco except for the old Third and Townsend station that serviced train runs into Southern California. To reach the City, East Coast travelers were transported by ferry from Oakland into San Francisco. See Henry Kisor's *Zephyr: Tracking a Dream Across America* (Times Books, New York, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Patrick William Riordan (1841-1914) was a native of New Brunswick, Canada. He attended St. Mary of the Lake University (later Seminary) and then transferred to a small college in South Bend, Indiana. The College of Notre Dame (later to become the University of Notre Dame, America's most popular Catholic university) had been hewn out of the wilderness by the Holy Cross Fathers. Only a dozen years earlier Indian villages and fur-trading posts dotted the Indiana prairie in 1842 when a fearless young priest, Father Edward Sorin, C.S.C, traveled from France to found what would later become the University of Notre Dame. Together with a small band of companions Father Sorin took possession of a log building in bad repair, dedicated the land and their efforts to the Mother of God, and began the arduous task of establishing an educational program suitable for the needs of the frontier dwellers. Patrick Riordan graduated from Notre Dame in 1858 and was selected as one of the first 12 students to attend the newly-established North American College in Rome. He was ordained at Mechlin, Belgium, on June 10, 1865.

Riordan returned to St. Mary of the Lake, Chicago, as professor of canon law and dogmatic theology. In 1883 He was named coadjutor archbishop of San Francisco with the right of succession to Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany. He succeeded to the see on December 28, 1884.

What were the circumstances that had induced the Archbishop to seek the help of the Salesians to minister to the needs of the growing Italian population

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Archbishop Riordan participated actively in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884. He strongly supported the establishment of national churches wherein immigrants could hear their mother tongue; in his own archdiocese he formed Italian, Spanish, Slovenian, Portuguese, French and German national churches. The Salesians would become the beneficiaries of Riordan's policy when they undertook to staff the Italian national church of SS. Peter and Paul.

The cause of Catholic education was very close to Riordan's heart. He founded Newman clubs at the University of California's Berkeley campus, at San Jose State University, and at Stanford University. Through successful fund-raising he established St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, entrusting it to the Sulpician Fathers. This mother seminary opened in 1898; it served the entire West as the only diocesan major seminary for more than a quarter of a century.

Riordan's beloved San Francisco suffered a catastrophic blow when the San Francisco fire and earthquake devastated the city in 1906. It so happened that the archbishop was en route to Chicago by train when the earthquake struck. When he was apprised of the events, he lost no time in returning home. Shortly after he was called upon to address the "General Citizens Committee on Relief and Reconstruction" which had been formed to restore the sagging civic morale. In characteristic eloquent fashion, Archbishop Riordan delivered the keynote address which was received with unrestrained enthusiasm. Echoing the words of St. Paul, spoken before his accusers in an earlier age, Riordan began: "Ladies and Gentleman of San Francisco: I am a citizen of no mean city, although it lies in ashes. Almighty God has fixed this as the location of a great city. The past is gone and there is no use lamenting or mourning over it. Let us look to the future without regard to creed or place of birth, and work together in harmony for the up-building of a greater San Francisco."

Riordan's words were brave indeed, and they were badly needed at a time of utmost crisis. Among the parishes that had been destroyed, was the Salesian church of SS. Peter and Paul; but phoenix-like it would rise from the ashes and later relocate in another site nearby and would become the "Italian Cathedral of the West", one of the West Coast's most beautiful churches.

During Riordan's episcopate, parishes increased from 50 to 120; priests from 100 to 350; schools and institutions from 46 to 102. Riordan's zeal for the faith never flagged. He constantly appealed to clergy and laity to work together in close harmony. His fluency in six languages endeared him to the immigrants who were flocking in ever increasing numbers to the city of Saint Francis. As the man who gave the initial impetus in bringing the Salesians to San Francisco, the followers of Don Bosco will always be indebted to his memory.

On Archbishop Riordan see the excellent biography by James P. Gaffey, *Citizen of No Mean City (Santa Rosa, California, 1976)*. Riordan's stirring keynote speech sponsored by the "General Citizens Committee on Relief and Reconstruction" can be found in the San Francisco newspapers, the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *San Francisco Call Bulletin* for April 26, 1906.

<sup>4</sup> By some ironic twist of fate, the location of the former site of the archbishop's chancery at 1100 Franklin St. was purchased in 1967 by the Salesian Society and became the headquarters of the San Francisco Province.

of his city? It was common knowledge that a rampant anticlerical spirit prevailed in the Italian community. The Italian church was poorly attended; religious instruction was neglected; the Italian immigrants were being weaned away by their leaders from the religion that had been their heritage from time immemorial. It was Riordan's hope that the presence of the Salesians would revitalize the religious fervor among their countrymen. But why the Salesians?

Ruffilo Uguccioni attributes the call of Don Bosco's missionaries to the city by the Golden Gate in part to the persuasive suggestion of the Jesuit, Fr. Joseph Sasia. Sasia was an enthusiastic admirer of Don Bosco whom he had known personally in Piedmont. Very concerned at the way the Italian immigrant population was drifting away from their faith, he strongly urged the archbishop to summon Don Bosco's spiritual sons to minister to them.

"Your Grace, Don Bosco's Salesians are the answer to your pressing problem concerning the Italian community in this city. But you must be aware of a special circumstance that might prevent their accepting your invitation."

"And what is that, Father?" queried the archbishop.

"According to their Rule," answered Sasia, "the Salesians are not permitted to undertake the staffing of a parish without the special approval of the Holy See."

Without a moment's hesitation came the reply: "That's one problem I'm sure I can easily solve."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> At the time this alleged conversation took place, Father Joseph Sasia, S.J. was vice provincial of the Oregon and California Province. For years he had enjoyed the friendship of Riordan's predecessor, San Francisco's first archbishop, Joseph Sadoc Alemany. We have no way of ascertaining whether Alemany had ever told Fr. Sasia that in 1870 he had invited Don Bosco to take over the diocesan orphanage in San Rafael just north of San Francisco. Don Bosco had actually accepted to send his Salesians to San Francisco in 1870 (five years before the first Salesian missionaries arrived in Buenos Aires). What occurred between Alemany and Don Bosco to abort the project has never been resolved. For the negotiations between the two parties to introduce the Salesian work in California see Michael Ribotta, "The Road Not Taken" in the *Journal of Salesian Studies* (Berkeley, California, 1990) Vol. 1, No. 2, 47-67.

Fr. Joseph Sasia was part of the Piedmontese connection—that group of Piedmontese Jesuits who fled the anticlerical persecution in Northern Italy after the "Quarantotto". Among them were Fathers John Nobili and Michael Accolti, who in 1851 were asked by the then bishop of California, Joseph Alemany, to assume the burden of an abandoned college. This was the humble beginnings of the now

Thus Fr. Sasia's suggestion set in motion correspondence between the archbishop of San Francisco and the rector major of the Salesian Society that would culminate one year later in the arrival of Fr. Piperni and his three traveling companions in the city by the Golden Gate.

During their exchange of letters, the Salesian missionary Father Angelo Piccono, en route to El Salvador to negotiate with the government of that country regarding the foundation of a Salesian house there, made a stopover in San Francisco. During his brief stay in San Francisco he visited Archbishop Riordan. On July 2, 1896, the archbishop wrote to Fr. Rua: "... Rev. Father Piconio [sic] called this week and stated that he would write to you urging the foundation of your Salesian Fathers in this city."<sup>6</sup> In that same letter of July 2, Archbishop Riordan expressed a strong desire to Don Rua to receive the Salesians in his diocese because of his concern for the welfare of the immigrant community in North Beach. In pleading for the Salesian presence in his diocese, he specified, however, two conditions that had to be met: Namely, a) The Salesians were to concentrate their work in San Francisco only among the Italian community; b) The missionaries who would be accepted in his diocese were to be Italian nationals, not English or Irish Salesians who spoke Italian; all travel expenses would be the responsibility of the diocese.

The archbishop asked for an immediate response to his request, and Don Rua promptly obliged. London-born Charles Louis Buss, a seminarian in Valdocco, who translated the letters of Archbishop Riordan for Don Rua, was instructed to write and inform the archbishop that the Salesians were agreeable to the undertaking as outlined. "We will honor the archbishop's request," Rua dictated. "By the end of this year (1896) or at the latest by early 1897, we propose to send six Salesians to San Francisco: three priests, one seminarian, and two lay brothers."

flourishing Santa Clara University. Four years later, Anthony Maraschi, S.J., again at Alemany's request, founded the St. Ignatius Academy in San Francisco which in 1930 became the University of San Francisco. Father Sasia served two terms as president of St. Ignatius College before it became the University of San Francisco. For the presence of the Society of Jesus in San Francisco during this period see John Bernard McGloin, S.J., *Jesuits by the Golden Gate* (University of San Francisco, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Eugenio Ceria, *Annali Della Società Salesiana* (SEI, Torino, 1943), Vol. 2, 588. Ceria cites the terms offered to Don Rua to acquire the Salesian presence in San Francisco: 1) The parish established for the Italians (SS. Peter and Paul) would be turned over to the Salesians. 2) The diocese would assume responsibility for all travel expenses and other immediate and necessary expenditures. 3) The Salesians would limit their ministry solely to the Italians in San Francisco.

Riordan was elated at the quick response and at the firm commitment made by the rector major of the Salesians. In a letter dated December 5, 1896, Archbishop Riordan forwarded him the steamship tickets for the group's transatlantic voyage. He also enclosed a draft for \$100 dollars to cover incidental expenses. A well-traveled member of the cloth himself, he was well aware of the hazards of train travel in those days, so he graciously provided first-class train accommodations for the entire group for their trip from Coast to Coast. His letter, rich in nostalgic details, which also demonstrates the archbishop's mounting concern for the group's welfare, is cited in its entirety below:

St. Mary's Cathedral  
 1100 Franklin St.  
 San Francisco, California

Dec. 5, 1896

Very Rev. Michael Rua, Sup.

Dear Rev. and dear Father:

I am sending you four (4) tickets from Genoa to San Francisco for the four (4) members of your Society who are to come here and take charge of the Italian parish. I thought that the two brothers would not object to traveling second class on the steamer, as second class has only reference to the location of the two rooms in the ship and are in no way discriminative. The tickets are for first class places on the railroad from New York to San Francisco. In signing the tickets the two clerics should sign as ministers of the Gospel, since to them as such, the deduction is allowed.

The route from New York is as follows: New York to Chicago, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. From Chicago to San Francisco, by the Chicago Northeastern, Union Pacific, Southern Pacific. In New York the four may go to the St. Clair House, Broadway and 8th St., unless they prefer to go to some other hotel for a day or so.

In Chicago if they should remain over a day or two, they should go to the Palmer House and call on my brother, Rev. D. J. Riordan, pastor of St. Elizabeth church, Wabash Avenue and 41st St., who will get sleeping car accommodations for them to San Francisco. I enclose a draft for \$100 (about 500 lire). Should they need more money, my brother in Chicago will give them what is necessary. I enclose on separate paper the directions to the hotel.

The steamer sails from Genoa on Dec. 31. I hope the fathers will be able to take this ship. By mistake the tickets were made out for four (4) priests. They should have been made out for ministers of the



Gospel. So in signing the tickets they should sign them as “Ministers of the Gospel.”

I hope this will be satisfactory. Should all wish to come first class in the steamer, you can pay the difference and I will send it to you. I have every confidence that God will bless this new foundation and that a great work will be done for His honor and glory, and will redound *ad salutem animarum*.<sup>7</sup>

In the meantime Don Rua had written to Fr. Piperni in Puebla, Mexico, where he was director of a Salesian school, to return posthaste to Turin to prepare for his departure for San Francisco. The letter stunned Fr. Piperni. The thought of leaving his beloved Mexico had a traumatic effect on him. In part the letter from the rector major read:

“... It is the considered judgment of the Superior Chapter to entrust you with the foundation of a Salesian house in San Francisco. For quite some time now the archbishop of that city has been pleading for the Salesians to care for the spiritual needs of the Italian immigrants in that city. I am enclosing the name of the one who will replace you as director of our school in Puebla. After you have helped him adjust to his new responsibilities, please come to Turin as fast as you can so you can meet the members of your party who will accompany you to San Francisco.”

Father Michael Rua, September 8, 1896.<sup>8</sup>

But Fr. Piperni’s small band did not leave from Genoa on December 31 as Archbishop Riordan had planned. Father Rua instructed Charles Buss<sup>9</sup> to inform the archbishop that he was most regretful (*tristissimo*) about the delay, but travel arrangements and last-minute pressing engagements had created an unavoidable

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<sup>7</sup> A copy of this letter can be found in the province archives of the San Francisco Province.

<sup>8</sup> Father Piperni quotes this letter in his personal memoirs, hereafter cited “Piperni, Cenni Autobiografici.” See page 9.

<sup>9</sup> London-born Charles Buss (1873-1938) was the translator of Archbishop Riordan’s letters for Fr. Rua. Ordained in the year of Piperni’s arrival in San Francisco he was later sent to that city as the assistant pastor of Corpus Christi and in 1907 became its pastor. A few years later he returned to England where he served as a military chaplain during World War I. He later returned to the United States where he worked in various parishes in Port Chester, Albany, and Los Angeles. He died in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1938 at the age of 65.

change in plans. The archbishop was further informed that the Salesian party would certainly leave no later than mid-February.

From Mexico it was a tearful farewell for Piperni who had come to love that country deeply. Among his personal papers we find a reference to his departure: "I left Mexico on January 12, 1897. That was the day I bade my last farewell to this beloved country. Over the years I have never been able to understand how such a people, so deeply rooted in Christianity, so noble in character, so hospitable to strangers, could have been victimized by a despicable revolutionary government."<sup>10</sup>

Back in Turin things moved quickly. Travel arrangements and business matters were expeditiously completed and last farewells exchanged. But there still remained one item of unfinished business. On the day before the group's departure, Father Rua entrusted a brief but heartfelt farewell message (written in Latin) to Fr. Piperni who would treasure it for many years as one of his most cherished possessions. In translation it reads:

My Dearest Sons in Christ,

As you depart for San Francisco, California, to undertake the great task ahead of you, my fatherly blessing goes with you. May Our Lord bless the work you are about to begin in that great city. May our Salesians in that new land increase and multiply like the sands of the seashore and the stars in the sky so that you may save countless souls and extend God's kingdom to the furthest bounds of the earth.

Do not forget your brothers here at home. Keep us ever in your prayers and remember us in your holy Mass. Above all remember me always in the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

The letter was dated February 16, 1897 and signed "Most affectionately yours in Jesus and Mary. Father Michael Rua."

On the following day, February 17, the group left for Genoa to board the steamship *Werra* for their ocean voyage.

We have no way of knowing whether Fr. Piperni shared Father Rua's farewell letter with Archbishop Riordan when the two met for the first time that March morning in the archbishop's office. One would like to think that he did

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<sup>10</sup> Piperni, "Cenni Autobiografici".

<sup>11</sup> Fr. Piperni long treasured this farewell token of Fr. Rua's love and concern for his departing missionaries. For them the brief but noble sentiments was the magna carta for their challenging apostolate in North America.

since it would have served as an appropriate formal introduction between the prelate and the priests who had responded to his call.

### The Four Who Came to the City of Saint Francis

Fr. Piperni was introduced to his traveling companions immediately upon his arrival from Mexico. It is most likely that he was meeting them for the first time. As he himself noted in his memoirs many years later: "I arrived in Turin at the end of January from Mexico. Preparations for our journey were begun immediately. I was presented to the Salesians chosen to accompany me. They were: Father Valentino Cassini (now in Buenos Aires), the seminarian Joseph Oreni, and the lay brother Nicholas Imielinski." He adds nothing further concerning the three companions who would soon cross ocean and continent with him during the coming month. Who was this priest, this seminarian, this lay brother who would work shoulder to shoulder with him during those first trying years in San Francisco?

**Father Valentino Cassini (1851-1922).** Small in stature, but full of ardent zeal, Father Cassini was the other Salesian priest in Fr. Piperni's missionary entourage. Twenty-two years earlier he had been among the ten Salesians that comprised the first historic missionary expedition to Buenos Aires. He labored in South America as a zealous missionary until 1887 when, as Bishop Cagliero's traveling companion, the two hastened to Turin to reach the deathbed of Don Bosco.

Thirteen years had passed since the day that Don Bosco had found him in a quiet corner of the Oratory alone and forlorn. When he was pressed by Don Bosco to explain why he was so crestfallen on the eve of his departure for the missions, young Valentino confessed that "I am unhappy about leaving for the missions because I shall never be seeing you again." Don Bosco attempted to comfort him: "Don't fret, son, we shall meet again. Don Bosco gives you his word on it." And he was right, although the circumstances surrounding their last meeting were heartrending. Cassini did meet Don Bosco again, as promised, a few weeks before he died.

For some unknown reason Father Cassini is referred to as "Valentino Cassinis" in the *Memorie Biografiche*. The earliest mention of him is found in an anecdote which occurred at the Oratory when Cassini was still a young seminarian. It seems that after several exhausting hours of hearing confessions, Don Bosco had come in late for dinner. A lay brother seeing him seated alone at table with no one waiting on him, immediately went into the kitchen to order something to eat. The cook, crotchety after a hard day's work, became indignant and ladled out a heaping dish of cold and overcooked rice. The lay brother

protested, explaining that the latecomer was Don Bosco. But the cook exploded: "Don Bosco is like everybody else and that's final!"

Young Cassini who overheard the outburst, reported the cook's words to Don Bosco who listened silently. He neither frowned, nor appeared upset, nor became annoyed. Instead he quietly remarked to the young seminarian, "The cook is right, you know, and what he said is true. There is no reason why I should not be treated like everybody else."

Fr. Cassini was to work with Fr. Piperni as his loyal associate for several years. Later he was asked to take over the parish of Corpus Christi on the outskirts of the city. A sizable community of Italians engaged in truck farming in that area had become loud in their demands for an Italian-speaking priest, and Cassini was assigned to that growing community.

In 1903 Cassini left California for Argentina where he spent the last years of his life. He died in Buenos Aires in 1922."<sup>12</sup>

**Seminarian Joseph Oreni (1874-?).** Joseph Oreni was born in Treviglio, Italy, in 1874 and was 23 when he arrived in San Francisco, the youngest member of the group. He was ordained three years later in 1900, but his stay in California was to be short-lived. On the year following his ordination he was transferred to Venezuela to serve the Italian immigrants there. After his departure for South America he disappears entirely from the annals of the San Francisco Province. Joseph Oreni, has the distinction of being the first Salesian ordained to the priesthood in North America. Fifteen years later he left the Salesian Congregation.

**Lay Brother Nicholas Imielinski (1873-1948).** Born in Dabrowa Bedzin, Poland, in 1873, young Imielinski professed as a Salesian a mere six months before his departure for San Francisco. His first assignment as sexton of SS. Peter and Paul church was also to be his last, and it did not terminate until more than a half century later when he died in San Francisco on May 26, 1948.

For decades this humble lay brother worked in the shadow of numerous dynamic Salesians who staffed the church of SS. Peter and Paul. Blessed with an enormous capacity for patience and tolerance, he is still remembered with fond affection by many old-timers (including this writer) as a sweet, saintly, and totally unflappable gentleman who could reduce to submission a savage horde of fifty altar boys simply by raising his finger to his lips.

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<sup>12</sup> Fr. Cassini's name is spelled "Cassinis" in the Italian *Memorie Biografiche*. See *IBM*: Vol. XI: 186, 284, 373-374, 502; Vol. XII: 104, 212; Vol. XIII: 257; Vol. XVIII: 404, 475, 489, 522.

“Brother Nick”, as he was affectionately known, was seldom seen outside the walls of his beloved church. Though he became stoop shouldered with the encroaching years, he was regarded as a veritable indestructible landmark to the churchgoers of SS. Peter and Paul. Loved and esteemed by the thousands of parishioners whom he served in his self-effacing way, he is no less a monument for the ages than the beautiful church he loved.

4. **Father Raphael Piperni** (1842-1930). Father Piperni’s arrival in San Francisco that winter morning in March, 1897, marked the end of a odyssey that during thirty years of priesthood had already spanned three continents. In his “Memoirs” which he wrote in later years, he recalled the events which led to his second visit to the city by the Golden Gate. For the sake of brevity we will abridge them below, but they constitute a fascinating saga of adventures and misadventures that truly merit a story of their own. His narrative begins:

I was born in Casacalenda, in the province of Campobasso, Italy, on July 25, 1842. My uncle, Father Michele Piperni was my tutor and guided me through my first years of schooling. I completed my philosophy and theology studies in the diocesan seminary and was ordained on April 6, 1867 by Bishop Francesco Giampaolo now deceased.

After ordination I taught school in the several *ginnasi* of the diocese. In my own hometown of Casacalenda I later started a night school for adult workers. It quickly became very popular and I myself taught in that school almost until the day I departed for the Missionary Institute in Brignole-Sale, Genoa. I attended this institution, which prepared candidates for the foreign missions, to discern whether I had a missionary vocation. After a year’s preparation and training I was convinced that I did have a missionary vocation and I was sent by the Propaganda to the Holy Land.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The archives of the San Francisco Province has typed copies of two of Fr. Piperni’s memoirs. The first, entitled “Cenni Autobiografici” is eleven pages in length. It begins with his birth in Casacalenda and carries the reader as far as the San Francisco fire and earthquake. His second memoirs was probably written at his superior’s request. It is entitled “Il Sacerdote Raffaele Maria Piperni e L’Opera Della Sacra Famiglia di Betlemme, Terra Santa” (“Father Raphael Maria Piperni, and the Work of the Holy Family in Bethlehem, The Holy Land). It is a typewritten work, replete with corrections. The date of its writing is noted: May 14, 1913. The latter work is a fascinating and intimate description of his fundraising experiences, his visits to various American cities, his illness in New Orleans. But it is his description of his thirteen-year sojourn in Mexico that reveals Piperni’s great love for that

At the end of his stay at the Missionary Institute, young Father Piperni met the man, who perhaps more than anyone else would influence his life and help chart the course of his missionary activities. Father Antonio Belloni, who would later join the Salesian Congregation, recruited Piperni to assist him in his work in the Near East country of Palestine.<sup>14</sup>

Father Piperni fell in love with Palestine from the very start. But it was especially the children of the poor that became the heart of his ministry. In the orphanage started by Belloni he taught these children French and Italian—precious commodities for youths eking out a living in a land overrun by

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country. Leaving it to return to Palestine was a painful conclusion to his lengthy and happy stay there.

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Belloni (1831-1903). Like Raffaele Piperni, Antonio also studied at the Missionary Institute of Brignole-Sale in Genoa. After his ordination in 1857 he left for Palestine where with great success he labored as a missionary for the rest of his life. Very much in the spirit of Don Bosco, poor children were his special concern. In time he would be referred to as “the father of the poor.” Next to the seminary where he taught he began an oratory, and again like Don Bosco, his first client was a young child hungry and out of work. After he was transferred to Bethlehem he opened an orphanage there, with the young lad he had befriended as its first lodger. Ecclesiastical honors were soon heaped upon Belloni: First he was made canon of the Holy Sepulcher; a few years later he was nominated to replace the Patriarch of Jerusalem who had just died. He managed to convince his superiors that such an appointment would interfere with a special project he was planning, and his name was subsequently removed from the list of appointees. That “special project” took form the following year with the approval of his religious society, the Brothers of the Holy Family. Its principal aim was the care of poor and abandoned children of Palestine. His Salesian connection was made in 1874 when during a trip to Europe he had a private audience with Pio Nono. The Holy Father urged him to visit Don Bosco in Turin. Their meeting is recorded by Ceria in the *Biographical Memoirs (EBM 11:385)* where Canon Belloni “... offered to hand over to the Salesians the work he had started.” This alleged meeting was supposed to have taken place in 1875, less than a year after the founding of the Brothers of the Holy Family. Why Canon Belloni would offer to “hand over” a religious foundation he had founded less than a year before, strains the author’s credibility. What Canon Belloni was actually seeking was not to give away his religious society, but rather to secure some kind of assistance from Don Bosco to further his work in Palestine. Don Bosco did assure Belloni that he would assist his work in Palestine, but such help was still years away. Don Bosco’s promise of a helping hand, however, took a peculiar turn. In 1890 proceedings got underway in Rome for a merger of Belloni’s Holy Family group with the Salesian Society. At that point in time Belloni entered Don Bosco’s religious family and continued his work as a Salesian in his beloved Palestine where he died in 1903. For further reading on this zealous missionary see Giorgio Shalub’s biography: *Abuliatama, Il padre degli orfani nel paese di Gesù*. (Abuliatama, The Father of Orphans in the Land of Jesus) SEI Publishers, Torino, 1955.

tourists. With obvious pride Piperni wrote in his "Memoirs" that these children in a short time picked up these languages so quickly that very soon many were earning money guiding French and Italian tourists who were visiting the Holy Places.

But Piperni's stay in Palestine was to be short-lived. Belloni tapped a talent that would produce incredible results—Father Piperni's gift for fund-raising. In Rome he secured the necessary credentials for soliciting funds in foreign lands. Armed with these and other letters of reference, he visited France, Belgium, England and Ireland. In England Cardinal Manning received him graciously, introduced him to members of the nobility, including the Duke of Norfolk, and himself made a generous contribution to Piperni's outstretched hand.

But it was in Ireland that he struck it rich.

I was advised to visit Ireland, but I had my doubts. I knew that it was a very Catholic country, but I also knew it was a poor one. However, I decided to pay a short visit there and ended up staying eight months. Cardinal Cullen received me very warmly and provided me with important letters of recommendation. Armed with these I visited the city of Cork and several neighboring towns. The generosity of these Irish people was incredible. The amount of money they contributed enabled our orphanage and other institutions in Palestine to meet pressing debts, but more funds were desperately needed. So I decided to continue on to [North] America.

Piperni's first stop in North America was Quebec, Canada. There an adamant chancery forbade him to preach in any church for funds since the diocese had a fund-raising drive of their own in progress. On to Montreal. Piperni's knowledge of French stood him in good stead, and with diocesan approval he preached in numerous churches and received considerable donations. By now an experienced world traveler, Piperni visited Toronto, Buffalo, and finally San Francisco.

His first experience in San Francisco was anything but encouraging. The Christian Brothers generously offered him lodging, but Archbishop Joseph Alemany viewed his visit with a certain distrust. For several days Piperni's papers were closely scrutinized. The archbishop's chancery advisors then politely told him to keep moving. And he did. His next stop was Sacramento (where he did quite well, thank you).<sup>15</sup> And then on to St. Joseph, Missouri, St. Louis,

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<sup>15</sup> In Sacramento (then the diocese of Marysville) he was received courteously enough, but his motives as a fund-raiser were regarded with some suspicion. When Fr. Piperni met with Bishop O'Connell in his office, the bishop was still not assured that

and finally he arrived in Philadelphia. After a brief stay in the city of Brotherly Love (where he found everything but), the indefatigable missionary turned south and headed for New Orleans. He arrived there in February and was cordially received by the French-speaking Archbishop Perché with whom, thanks to his French sympathies, he struck up a warm friendship.

During the new arrival's stay in New Orleans, Fr. Piperni experienced the best of times and the worst of times. For the first two months his talks and services in the local churches brought in sizable contributions. People opened their purse strings and their hearts for his cause. But it was the amicable relationship which developed between Fr. Piperni and Archbishop Perché of New Orleans that made it all possible. Perché not only gave Piperni free rein to solicit funds in his diocese, but granted him all the necessary faculties to minister to the Italian immigrants in his city. "I really felt at home in New Orleans," he wrote later. "The people took our orphans very much to heart. Their generous offerings heartened me as I made my rounds to the various parishes."<sup>16</sup>

Three months later disaster struck. In early May several cases of yellow fever were reported in New Orleans. In a few weeks a raging epidemic of yellow fever was decimating the population. Fr. Piperni noted in his private journal that the disease was claiming 500 victims a day, of whom 300 generally died.

Fr. Piperni quickly brought his fund-raising campaign to a halt. He used every waking hour to minister to victims throughout the city. By early September the epidemic began to abate, but not before Piperni himself was stricken. Recognizing the symptoms of the disease that were afflicting him, he hastened to the chancery office, requested the money he had collected during his stay be forwarded to Fr. Belloni in Bethlehem, then sought medical attention. Prognosis for his recovery was bleak. It seemed that he too would become a statistic. During those first critical days, Archbishop Perché visited him frequently, insisting that the best hospital care be made available to this zealous priest whom he had come to love and admire.

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he was truly a bona fide missionary from Palestine. At a certain point in their conversation O'Connell casually pulled a book off his bookshelf. It was an illustrated volume of monuments of the Holy Land. "By the way, Father, do you recognize this church?" he asked. It was an artist's sketch of the church of the Nativity, a landmark very familiar to the missionary. "Certainly, that's the church of the Nativity, he responded, and then went on to give a detailed description of its interior, its history, and its importance as a tourist attraction in Bethlehem. Piperni later recalled: "Once he heard my explanation his whole attitude towards me changed and he told me 'Now I'm convinced that you really are who you say you are.' The book was entitled *Travels Through the Holy Land*. By sheer chance the bishop had turned to a page I was very familiar with. Had he shown me a religious shrine, or landmark, or holy place that I was unfamiliar with, he would have probably denounced me as an impostor."

<sup>16</sup> Piperni, "Cenni Autobiografici", 7.



The crisis passed and soon Piperni was out of danger, but his convalescence was prolonged by his weakened condition. At the urging of a woman friend, he decided to leave the plague-ravaged city for a brief sojourn in Mexico before returning home.

When Archbishop Perché learned of Fr. Piperni's impending departure, he presented him with a glowing written testimonial attesting to the heroic work he had performed among the victims of the yellow fever epidemic.<sup>17</sup> He also emphasized that while the missionary priest was soliciting funds for the poor children of Palestine, the good of souls was always his paramount interest. He concluded by expressing his desire that Fr. Piperni be extended every courtesy and consideration and that his fund-raising efforts be assisted. In December of 1878, Fr. Piperni arrived in Mexico City for a brief stay before returning home. Thirteen years later he departed for Palestine.

I arrived in Mexico City in December. Bishop Labastida gave me a very friendly welcome and showed me every courtesy. During my stay in Mexico every bishop I was introduced to was very gracious to me and gave me every opportunity to continue my fund-raising activity. They also encouraged me to conduct missions among the people for their spiritual welfare.

I immediately plunged into the study of Spanish so I could speak to the congregation in their own language. I was amazed at their response. Although a poor nation their generosity exceeded all my expectations. As I look back on those years spent in Mexico, I must confess that I get choked up when I think about the generosity and the goodness of those people.<sup>18</sup>

After thirteen years of what he called his "years of wandering" (*anni di peregrinazione*) Fr. Piperni decided it was time to return home. The year was 1891. The work of the Brothers of the Holy Family had undergone remarkable

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<sup>17</sup> The warm testimonial of New Orleans' Archbishop N. Y. Perché, attesting to Fr. Piperni's heroic efforts during the yellow fever epidemic, can be read in its entirety in Uguccioni's biography, *op.cit.*, p. 30. The archbishop also endorsed Fr. Piperni's fund-raising activities and encouraged everyone to support them. In part the letter reads: "I, the undersigned, affirm that the Rev. Raphael Piperni has been authorized by his superiors to collect funds. He has been active in my diocese for the past eight months and has demonstrated his priestly concern for the good of souls. During the epidemic that ravaged our city he has shown remarkable bravery and courage in his ministrations among the victims of the disease even to the risk of his life. ..."

<sup>18</sup> Piperni, "Cenni Autobiografici," p.7.

development during his absence—thanks in large part to the substantial sums Fr. Piperni regularly remitted from abroad. But perhaps the Society had become the victim of its own success. Piperni soon discovered that the humble orphanage he had left behind thirteen years earlier had now expanded into a large trade school with an adjoining church. Moreover, the Brothers of the Holy Family were struggling to maintain two agricultural schools in the countryside nearby. The physical development had indeed been remarkable, but the growth in personnel had not kept pace. Besides, the members lacked the administrative skills and business acumen to operate these new foundations successfully.

Founder Antonio Belloni knew he had to face reality. If his work in Palestine was to be assured of any kind of continuity, his foundation would have to be disbanded and then merged with a stable and well-organized religious group like the Salesians of Don Bosco. Negotiations with Rome got underway. Belloni's appeal to Don Rua to incorporate his religious society into the Salesian Congregation was honored and in 1892 both founder, Antonio Belloni, and missionary Raphael Piperni, were received, along with most of the members of the now extinct society of the Brothers of the Holy Family, into the Salesian family.<sup>19</sup>

On October 8, 1892, Fr. Piperni made his profession into the Salesian Society and was assigned to Mexico where the Salesians had recently opened their first institution. Back in the country he loved, Fr. Piperni was soon made director of the Salesian trade school in Puebla. Three years later he was summoned to Turin by Fr. Rua and entrusted with the founding of the first Salesian work in North America.

Fr. Eugenio Ceria has observed that the selection of Raphael Piperni for the task was both logical and appropriate. "Fr. Piperni knew English; he was familiar with the American way of life and was resourceful and tactful." He then adds one more rather peculiar qualification: "He was Neapolitan," (*era napoletano*). Ceria then supports this somewhat odd recommending factor by explaining that a Neapolitan would be right at home in San Francisco and quickly accepted by the Italian community because the city was full of Italian immigrants from southern Italy. He might have added (had he known) that Piperni's fiery oratorical pulpit style would have had a strong appeal to his countrymen.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For the Salesian experience in the Holy Land and the gradual development of the Salesian work there, see E. Ceria, *Annali, Della Società Salesiana*. Vol. 2, chapter 15, "The Salesians in the Land Where Jesus Walked."

<sup>20</sup> E. Ceria, *op.cit.*, 588-589.

**Anselmo Petazzi (1877-1941)**

Although Anselmo Petazzi has not been historically linked to the pioneer band of the first Salesians who began the Salesian work in North America, it is time that he vault from being a footnote to a rightful leading role as a “founding brother.” To him belongs the honor and distinction of being the first vocation to profess as a Salesian in North America.

During his stay in the city by the Golden Gate, he formed a close bond with Fr. Piperni who cultivated his calling to the religious life and had the joy of receiving his vows as a Salesian on August 15, 1900. During the ten years he remained in San Francisco he became Fr. Piperni’s right-hand man and indispensable aide. In 1907 he was summoned to the East Coast by Father Michael Borghino, then provincial of the Province of St. Philip the Apostle in the United States, and assigned to Troy, New York.

Little did Anselmo dream that when ten years earlier he had written to Don Rua to send the sons of Don Bosco to minister to the underprivileged youths in Boston, he would be fulfilling that very role in east coast cities like Port Chester, Elizabeth, and New York.

Brother Petazzi spent most of his Salesian life in Port Chester, New York, as director of the local Salesian boys club. At his death the city’s newspaper headlined his passing: “Rev. Brother Anselmo Dies: Leader and Friend of Boys.” It then wrote in its editorial: “Two generations of Port Chester men and boys, literally thousands of them, lost their most beloved friend when Brother Anselmo Petazzi, one of the founders of the Don Bosco youth movement in Port Chester died.”

**Strangers in a Strange Land**

Two days after his arrival, on Sunday morning, March 13, Father Piperni celebrated a solemn high Mass in the wooden frame church of SS. Peter and Paul at the corner of Filbert and Dupont (now Grant Avenue) Streets. In his sermon he outlined plans for a 15-day mission to “rekindle the flame of faith” that had languished in the community. That memorable morning lived long in his memory. Many years later he would remember: “My sermon was well received. But having lived for fifteen years in a Spanish-speaking country, in the excitement of my preaching what came out was a hodgepodge of Italian and Spanish expressions.”

But the flame of faith that Fr. Piperni in his first years strove to “rekindle” flickered feebly for years. The Italian immigrant situation in San Francisco was perhaps like no other in the country. The Italian community was in the grip of vicious anticlerical leaders. From the start the immigrant’s lot was not a happy one. The Italians were the last of the major immigrant groups to reach American

shores. Just as a half century earlier the arrival of armies of Catholic Irish, Poles, Germans had borne the brunt of harsh discrimination and intolerance, now it was the Italians' turn. These newcomers, from Southern Italy especially, appeared even more foreign than the Irish once had. Their presence on American soil resurrected various versions of anti-Catholic nativism.<sup>21</sup>

Years before the arrival of Fr. Piperni's band, there had been a voluntary immigration to the United States, made up mostly of British, Scandinavian, German, and Irish people. This first mass migration from Northern and Western Europe, it was generally accepted, was sturdy, pioneering and permanent. In the words of a 1910 report, "the old immigrants mingled freely with the native Americans and were quickly assimilated."

The new immigrant, however,—the Italian, Greek, Hungarian—was considered another breed. A whole mythology was created to explain him. He did not bring his family with him, the story went. He willingly worked for starvation wages, huddled in slums which no native American could tolerate, paid fewer taxes than the ordinary American citizen, took a larger share of public charity, and committed a greater share of the crimes. He was often characterized as a bird of passage, making his stake in the United States and then returning home. Or, if he stayed long enough to acquire citizenship papers, he sold his vote to politicians for the cheapest of handouts. He was, in short, unassimilable, and he threatened to break down American civilization. These sentiments inspired many hate pamphlets and innumerable bigoted newspapers and magazines.

This scenario fitted pretty accurately the distorted view of the Italian immigrants that the Salesians had come to serve. Most had been peasants or fishermen in their homeland, with few marketable skills that could help them rise in an urban, industrial world. As Jacob Riis had affirmed: "The Italians had come in at the bottom."

Even within the Catholic Church, where they comprised a considerable proportion of the communicants, they found little opportunity for leadership.

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<sup>21</sup> Nativism or "Know-Nothingism" was a prolonged outbreak of anti-Catholic and anti-foreigner agitation that became a divisive movement in mid-century and then subsided with the coming of the Civil War. It flared out again towards the end of the century and Italian immigrants were often its victims. "Know-Nothingism" received its name from a society whose members, in accordance with an oath, "didn't know when questioned about its personnel, activities, etc." The Know-nothings, as a clandestine organization, were allied with the Nativist Party which believed that "All men are created equal, except Negroes and foreigners and Catholics," especially Catholic foreigners. On the Nativism movement and its anti-foreigner activities see J. C. Furnas, *The Americans: A Social History of the United States* (New York, 1969).

As late as 1960, when Italian-Americans numbered one in six of American Catholics, there was not one Italian-American bishop of the hundred Catholic bishops, nor one Italian-American archbishop of the twenty-one Catholic archbishops. The Irish-Americans, who had arrived in large numbers a half-century before the Italians were in charge of the American Catholic hierarchy.<sup>22</sup>

The Italian community, then, writes sociologist Daniel Bell, had to find their opportunities between the cracks, in enterprises not already preempted, in those which required neither capital nor specialized training. Fr. Piperni all too soon realized that without a competent grasp of the English language, the Italian immigrant in his city would continue to remain a second-class citizen. Harking back to the evening school for working adults he had initiated in his home town in Italy, he organized the first Americanization school in San Francisco, and possibly in California. With the help of Father Bernard Redahan, a newly arrived Salesian, the Americanization school, with its English classes and acculturation opportunities, were constantly packed. An old photograph taken of a class in progress in the Americanization school of those years shows a room crammed with workingmen in rapt attention.<sup>23</sup>

Five years had now passed since Fr. Piperni had arrived in San Francisco. He was in desperate need of help. Newly-ordained Fr. Oreni had been transferred to Venezuela; Fr. Cassini was now engaged almost full-time in the mission station which would become the parish of Corpus Christi. Fr. Piperni was virtually alone. September 5, 1902 was to be an historic day in the annals of the Salesian work in San Francisco. On that day an overjoyed Piperni welcomed the reinforcements who had been assigned to assist him at SS. Peter and Paul's. The leader of the group was Father Michael Borghino, recently appointed provincial of the United States province of St. Philip the Apostle which had been canonically established seven months earlier on January 20, 1902.

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York, 1973), 85 and passim. Dr. Boorstin, whose book, *The Americans*, was awarded the Bancroft Prize, has garnered many awards and prizes (He was the first incumbent of the chair of American History at the Sorbonne). He served as the director of the Library of Congress. His book, rich in bibliography, treats the immigrant problem in revealing detail.

<sup>23</sup> See *SS. Peter and Paul Church: The Chronicles of 'The Italian Cathedral' of the West (San Francisco, 1985)*, 38 and passim. This extraordinary volume came into existence through the untiring efforts of Fr. Gabriel Zavattaro, SDB. Its publication marked the centennial founding of SS. Peter and Paul church, 1884-1984. Its collection of more than one hundred rare photographs alone makes the volume a precious collector's item. Many of the photographs in the *Chronicles* are seen for the first time.

Fr. Joseph Simeoni, for whom San Francisco would become his adopted city, vividly recalled the arrival of the group that September morning:

Although it happened 42 years ago, I can remember our arrival on that September morning as though it were yesterday. Our train reached the end of the line in Oakland. It was exactly nine in the morning. Our train trip from New York to San Francisco had taken eight days. Father Michael Borghino, our new Salesian superior, was the leader of our band which included Fathers Andrew Bergeretti, Emilio Pavan, Joseph Galli, lay brother John Bovio, and myself, Joseph Simeoni, a young seminarian. Fr. Piperni was eagerly awaiting us, and as we got off the train he warmly embraced each one of us. Though of small stature, I could see he was wiry and full of energy. We went straight to the parish rectory where luncheon was awaiting us. After we had eaten, Fr. Piperni who never stopped bubbling over with joy, gave us a brief but animated welcome speech. I remember him telling us: "You don't have to go to far-off China to follow your missionary vocation. Your 'China' is right here in San Francisco where a huge harvest awaits you. Your task is to save the souls of the numerous Italians in our community. But above all I don't want you to be discouraged by those anticlericals who have abandoned their faith, nor by their vicious lies that will be directed against you in their newspapers." It seemed that he was telling us all this to prepare us for something. And he was.

He went to the cupboard and came back with both hands full of stones, and some of them not small either. He placed them in a row on the table for us to see. "These," he said, "are just few of the stones that have been thrown at me recently while walking down Dupont St.—a street, by the way, which I strongly urge you to steer clear of." That was the introduction to our parish of SS. Peter and Paul.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Fr. Joseph Simeoni, SDB, (1881-1967) was to remain by Fr. Piperni's side for more than 20 years. Acquiescing to his superior's request to write an account of his experiences with Fr. Piperni he produced a short sketch of his life. Though untitled, it is referred to as "A Biographical Sketch of Father Raffaele Piperni." It begins:

Acting on obedience, I begin to jot down some episodes of the life of Fr. Piperni as I witnessed them or as they were related to me. All in all, I was with him more than 20 years so I had the opportunity, more than others, to observe him and study his pastoral ministry as he lived it.

I affirm, and many will no doubt agree with me, that Fr. Piperni was the grand old patriarch of the San Francisco Province—and I might add, he was the most popular person in the Italian community of San Francisco. In fact, almost every Italian in California either knew him personally, or heard of him, or was in some way

The display of those guided missiles that Fr. Piperni had placed on the table was not an idle gesture. The lot of the Salesians in the city of Saint Francis during those early years was not blessed with the proverbial loving peace associated with that city's patron saint. A vicious anticlerical spirit, aided and abetted by several Italian newspapers and church-hating anarchists, carried on a campaign of hate without letup. Fr. Piperni was a constant target both physically (his stone collection) and verbally—obscenities were often shouted at him as he walked down Dupont St.

But the vilest blow of all would occur under the cover of night when shadowy figures would scrawl obscenities on the doors of the church and nail pages of *The Donkey (L'Asino)*, a scurrilous newspaper, printed in Rome, whose sole purpose was to discredit the Church and vilify its priests. "Fr. Piperni, with the help of his faithful Vittorio, would get up at three a.m. on Sunday mornings, and with a bucket of hot water, soap, and scrub brush would wash away the hate slogans and offensive cartoons." In time these coarse acts of vandalism diminished, but the attacks against the Church found their way into the local anticlerical newspapers. Years later in 1914 Fr. Piperni's cherished dream was realized. He would fight fire with fire; that year saw the appearance of the *Bolletino Parrocchiale (The Parish Bulletin)*. Through this publication Fr. Piperni was able to attack his attackers, to discredit the yellow press tactics of the anticlericals. In its heyday the *Bolletino* enjoyed statewide circulation and its influence far exceeded its modest unspectacular appearance. The enemy never completely surrendered, but an uneasy truce was gradually arrived at when the local anticlerical press (*L'Italia*, to name one) learned that the pastor of SS. Peter and Paul could give as easily as he might get.

### The Earth Shook, the Sky Burned

San Francisco was booming right along with the rest of the nation in the spring of 1906. The church of SS. Peter and Paul had become a haven for the Italian community. The Americanization school was in great demand; baptisms that year reached 700; confirmation and First Communion were administered twice a year to 250 children and adults; the Sunday school had an enrollment of 2000 children. Certainly everyone agreed that a larger church and expanded

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acquainted with him. Fr. Piperni's name was identified with the church of SS. Peter and Paul and our Salesian apostolate.

The description above of Fr. Simeoni's first encounter with Fr. Piperni is found in his "Biographical Sketch" in the San Francisco Province archives in San Francisco.

facilities were a top priority. These expectations were soon realized, but in a far different manner than most people expected.

In the less than ten years since the arrival of the first Salesians in San Francisco, the city's silhouette was changing, filling out.<sup>25</sup> These had been years of increasing prosperity following the depression of the mid-1890s. San Francisco was riding the top of the boom, and optimism colored all levels of life. It was a lively time for a lively town.

In the space of a few hours all that would change. In the morning of April 18, 1906, San Francisco was struck by one of the largest earthquakes ever recorded in North America. At first, the loss of life seemed to be light, and the damage moderate. But a crippling blow had been struck when the quake severed the city's water mains. Small scattered fires soon grew into one huge conflagration, and without adequate water to fight it, much of San Francisco was consumed by the time the fire was finally brought under control three days later.

In his Memoirs, Fr. Piperni recorded the loss that the Salesians sustained in that disastrous event.

On April 18, three days after Easter, San Francisco was in flames. Two days later, the conflagration reached us, and our rectory and church of SS. Peter and Paul were swept away by the fire. While the fire was consuming whole blocks of North Beach, our Salesians showed incredible valor and rushed to help the victims who had lost everything to the flames. For weeks we spent all our time visiting and comforting the unfortunate members of our community who were now living in tents which had been pitched in fields and small parks that the fire had not reached.

How could I tend to my flock without a church? I did the next best thing. I managed to secure a large number of enclosed wagons, and thoroughly cleaned them out. Then I aligned them in a circle, covered this arrangement with a huge tent. It was a strange-looking structure, but it proved serviceable enough for us to hold our Sunday services in it. This went on for two months. During this time, after clearing the debris from the site of the burnt-out church, we erected a wooden frame building as our church. It was crude-looking, but it served our needs.

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<sup>25</sup> There is a plethora of books on early San Francisco history and on the 1906 fire and earthquake that devastated the city. On San Francisco history see Charles Wollenberg, *Golden Gate Metropolis: Perspectives on Bay Area History* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, 1985); on the fire and earthquake, John Castillo Kennedy, *The Great Earthquake and Fire: San Francisco, 1906* (New York, 1963); on the religious climate in the city, John B. McGloin, S.J., *Jesuits by the Golden Gate* (San Francisco, 1972).



Since our people were all dislocated and living wherever they could find shelter, I used to walk around the neighborhood on Sunday mornings, ringing a loud bell and shouting out to whoever could hear, the hours of the Sunday Masses.<sup>26</sup>

The inhabitants of North Beach, as the Italian quarter was known, suffered an almost total loss of their homes and belongings. That part of the city, composed largely of wooden buildings standing shoulder-to-shoulder, easily facilitated the spread of the flames. No fire fighting force in that time and place could have saved those homes from destruction. Some of the refugees from the fire caught ferries to Oakland, but most headed for Golden Gate Park, the Presidio, or the city's smaller parks out of the fire zone, where they camped out in jerry-built tents. For weeks after the fire, people cooked outdoors over makeshift grills and stoves, a necessity mandated by the mayor's order not to cook indoors until chimneys had been inspected. In Golden Gate Park construction was begun on one-room "refugee shacks," which were arrayed row upon row in open fields.

For months the Salesians ministered to the dispossessed. Every Sunday Fr. Redahan would ride out in horse and buggy and offer Mass in a huge tent in the Presidio. They were constantly on call to assist the needy—the wounded, the displaced, the homeless—whether parishioners or not. They were active in their participation in the city's Central Council. Orphans, lost children, the elderly became their special concern.

Let it not be forgotten that the Salesians too suffered devastating losses—their church and rectory and church facilities, and even some of their prized personal possessions. But Fr. Piperni was not one to wring his hands because his place of worship had gone up in smoke. Many times he had fought against difficult odds, but this was perhaps the greatest challenge he had ever faced. His rare courage and vitality rallied the Italian community into action. Willing hands helped clear the debris, and phoenix-like a modest church building rose from the ashes. Italian bankers like A. P. Giannini (founder of the Bank of America) provided timely loans to North Beach residents to help in the reconstruction. Italian banks guaranteed the safety of their deposits. Six months after the San Francisco fire quake, on October 7, 1906, Bishop George Montgomery blessed the new SS. Peter and Paul church which had been rebuilt on the same site.

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<sup>26</sup> Piperni, "Cenni Autobiografici," p.11.

### Fr. Piperni Begins the 'Italian Cathedral' of the West

By the following year (1907), parish statistics confirmed remarkable progress since the earthquake: 10,000 parishioners, 655 baptisms, 213 marriages, and 890 children attending catechism classes.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile Fathers Bernard Redahan and Thomas Deehan, who had arrived three years earlier, had taken over the operation of the Americanization classes and were actively involved in the acculturation of the Italian community in their direction of the Young Men's Institute and the Don Bosco Council.

From the start, the hastily-constructed, wooden church of the "new" SS. Peter and Paul was intended by Fr. Piperni only as a temporary replacement. By 1913 a larger and more commodious church became a critical necessity. The building on Filbert and Dupont Sts. had now become totally inadequate for its 25,000-member congregation. A search was begun for a new building site. How Fr. Piperni came by the spacious property across from what is now Washington Square is interesting. But far more intriguing is the interaction in the drama which took place between the two principal players.

Over the years, Abe Reuf had been a strong supporter of the Salesians, and had developed a deep respect for Italian ingenuity and the hard-working qualities of the Italian immigrants. He himself, the son of a migrant Jewish merchant from France, was a scholar of the classics and had graduated from the University of California in Berkeley and the Hastings Law School.

At the turn of the century and up to 1908, Abe Reuf was the political "boss" in San Francisco. Many an hour he spent with the Salesian Fathers speaking Latin with them, an exercise which he extremely enjoyed. And on a number of occasions he held conversations in Hebrew with Father Piperni who had lived in the Middle East (Palestine) for a number of years.

Through Frank Marini, a longtime friend of Reuf and one of the leaders of the parish, Reuf's property was acquired for \$47,000. Archbishop Riordan who negotiated a bank loan, saw to it that the archdiocese contributed \$5000 toward the building fund, and promised an equal sum when the new church was erected.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Chronicles, op.cit.*, p. 44

<sup>28</sup> *Chronicles, op.cit.*, p. 54. There is also a dark side of the life and times of Abe Reuf. He was seen by many as an unsavory character, much of the same stripe of the Tammany Hall politicians in New York City. In those days of political bossism which created flagrant abuses, it was almost impossible not to get one's hands dirty.

The building project which had begun with much fanfare in 1913 soon bogged down. Spiraling costs and a recession which preceded America's entry into World War I placed a severe strain on Fr. Piperni and upon his resources. But the work went on. In that year Father Pietro Ricaldone, the future rector major, paid a visit to the parish and viewed the excavation for the foundation of the church which would house the crypt. Approximately seventy percent of the construction workers who worked on the church were Italian immigrants. Church records show that the costs of materials and labor, just for the foundations totaled \$73,834—a staggering sum for those days. The steel foundation beams reached 22 feet into the earth—if there was to be a next time, it would take a mighty earthquake to level the new church.

After almost two years of construction the crypt of the new SS. Peter and Paul was blessed by Bishop Edward Hanna on December 20, 1914. For Fr. Piperni it was a day of mixed emotions. Joy over the completion of the crypt that was to serve as the parish church for the next ten years, and sadness over the absence of Archbishop Riordan who was gravely ill at that time. The man who had been most supportive, who had stood by him through difficult times, who had become a close and intimate friend and who had made it all possible, died a few days later.<sup>29</sup>

### Golden Jubilee of Priesthood, 1867-1917

Twenty years after his arrival in San Francisco, the city feted Fr. Raphael Piperni on the occasion of his 50th anniversary of priesthood. He was now 75. The last twenty five years of those years had been spent as a Salesian. The festivities extended well beyond the boundaries of North Beach's Italian community. Archbishop Edward Hanna celebrated the jubilee Mass in the crypt. Numerous important ecclesiastics were present, as was the mayor of San Francisco, Angelo Rossi, and a covey of civic leaders. Most of the leading Italian figures who in earlier days had sparred with Fr. Piperni in newspaper columns or on civic occasions were also present. Now he was no longer their

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<sup>29</sup> To nearly the end of his seventy-three years of life, Patrick Riordan remained in full command of his powers and alert to the great issues of the day. He died one day short of three full decades as archbishop of San Francisco. Archbishop Ireland was stricken by the news of his friend's death, telegramming: "The Church has lost a valiant soldier, the American Hierarchy one of its most brilliant members, myself the truest of friends." The first American Salesians will always be indebted to this man who was responsible for securing their ministry among the Italian immigrants of San Francisco.

whipping boy but a respected courageous priest to whom they were paying dutiful if silent homage.

At the conclusion of the gala dinner given in the jubilarian's honor that evening, the guest speaker struck a responsive chord in his audience (and drew a standing ovation) when he paid tribute to the honoree for his masterful and commanding oratorical style. "When Fr. Piperni speaks, people not only listen but they act". He then concluded with the words of the poet Colley Cibber: "Persuasion tips his tongue when'er he talks."

The next ten years were quiet ones as San Francisco's Gilded Age came to an end. The era of opulence created by the Bonanza Kings who had tapped into Nevada's incredibly rich high-grade silver lode (the Comstock Lode) was on the wane. The second decade of the 20th century saw the emergence of a substantial middle class supported by an expanding and increasingly diversified economy based on shipping, fishing, agriculture, and manufacturing. Many of the Italian immigrants were beginning to find fame and fortune in a prospering and revitalized San Francisco. What had been a small city with its forest of spars along the waterfront and horse-drawn drays clattering across cobbled streets was now beginning to take the form of a metropolis. The first "skyscrapers" began to change the city's skyline. A network of cable cars extended far beyond the city center; nor did the city fathers neglect the beautification of their growing metropolis as Golden Gate Park was developed into an oasis of greenery and inviting places for recreation. Against this backdrop of social and economic change Fr. Piperni and the Salesians of SS. Peter and Paul expended all their energies to assimilate their immigrant Church into the American mainstream, to care for the health and welfare of their parishioners, to strengthen their families, and most of all, to offer their children hope.

### The Mad Bomber

Fr. Piperni was 84 when the "mad bomber" first struck on the evening of January 30, 1926. Ailing and semi-retired, the patriarch of the Western Salesians, still occupied a room in the rectory next to the new church of SS. Peter and Paul. Fr. Oreste Trinchieri, founder of San Francisco's famed Salesian Boys Club and the future first provincial of the San Francisco Province of St. Andrew, had been assigned as the parish's administrator.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Oreste Trinchieri (1885-1936) arrived in San Francisco as a young priest in 1914. He served as administrator of SS. Peter and Paul parish during Fr. Piperni's illness and succeeded him as pastor in 1929. He served as the first provincial of the San Francisco Province of St. Andrew from 1927-1934. His very promising career was cut short while attending a dinner honoring his friend and fellow parishioner,

Fr. Piperni was not destined to go quietly into his retirement. The man whom the newspapers termed the “mad bomber” saw to that. This deranged terrorist carried on a fourteen-month-long terror campaign which included five church bombings and left Fr. Piperni deeply grieved and seriously ill. On Sunday morning, January 31, the *San Francisco Examiner*, the city’s leading newspaper, came out with a screaming headline:

### SS. Peter and Paul’s Church Bombed

Windows in Edifice and Homes of Neighborhood  
are Shattered by Terrific Explosion  
Priests Blame Plot on Fanatics: Three in  
Building at the Time Escape Injuries <sup>31</sup>

With this startling headline began a nightmare for Fr. Piperni that would continue for more than a year. The *Examiner* in true Hearstian style reported in vivid detail the roar and effect of the bomb that had exploded in the rear of the church and shook an entire square block:

The bomb, evidently exploded by a time fuse, was placed directly against the rear wall of the church on Brant Alley, and only a few feet from the main altar. The altar suffered only slight damage, but three persons in the church were in the path of danger and escaped injury by the margin of a few minutes.

Father Oreste Trinchieri, administrator of the parish, declared the deed was undoubtedly the work of a fanatic. “Only a fanatic could have attempted to blow up the altar....The bomb, believed to have contained six sticks of dynamite, was exploded by a timing device set to go off at ten minutes after eleven o’clock...

There was a crash that roused the neighborhood for blocks. Glass fell in showers both from the church and from the apartments nearby. Panic-stricken residents ran out from their homes while scores of policemen and firemen rushed to the scene. Only a few minutes earlier Brother Nicholas and his assistant, Vittorio Grifello, had been decorating the altar with flowers for the coming celebration of the feast

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Mayor Angelo Rossi. He suffered a fatal heart attack as he was about to speak on that festive occasion.

<sup>31</sup> All newspaper accounts of the *San Francisco Examiner* referring to stories and coverage of the “Mad Bomber” are found in microfilm in the *Examiner* library in the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library.

of St. Francis of Sales. Both men had just completed their task and left the rear of the church when the bomb exploded. Four priests, including Fathers Trinchieri and Piperni, the 83-year old head of the parish, were asleep in the parish house.

Any hope that the January bombing was the onetime act of a madman was shattered three months later when a second bomb rocked the church. This blast came at 3:22 in the morning and caused only negligible damage. For the first time the police had a description of the terrorist. A night watchman at a nearby construction site testified that he had seen a man running from the direction of the church into an alleyway. "I could identify him if I saw him again," he said, and then gave a description of the stranger: He was dark complexioned, about five feet nine inches tall and about thirty years of age.

At Mass the next morning Fr. Trinchieri appealed to the people to assist the police in apprehending the culprit responsible for the bombing. But further investigation turned up no new clues.

Six months later on October 29, 1926, a third bomb exploded in the main entrance, more powerful than the previous two. It shook buildings for blocks around. This time the blast caused considerable damage, imperiled the lives of the priests asleep in the rectory, and endangered the pastor of the church. Fr. Piperni had just returned to the rectory after an illness of three months. Brother "Nick" Imielinski escaped serious injury by the skin of his teeth. Getting up ten minutes later than his usual time, he had just left the sacristy and was on his way to open the church doors when the blast occurred. The bomb, believed to have been composed either of dynamite or nitroglycerine with a time fuse attached, tore a two-foot hole through the floor of the main entrance, sent huge blocks of marble crashing down the walls of the vestibule, shattered doors, and blocked the entrance with an avalanche of timber and plaster.

The fourth bomb exploded on January 9, almost a year from the first attempt. It caused more damage than the other three combined. Despite a dragnet of police and detectives stationed in the shadows of the church they were unable to apprehend the bombers who fled by automobile. As a result of the four bombings, the Continental Insurance Company canceled its insurance policy with the church of SS. Peter and Paul.

Meanwhile an enraged citizenry demanded more police protection. Fr. Piperni called for a triduum of reparation and the Blessed Sacrament was exposed on the high altar from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. each day, bringing thousands of parishioners who came to pray for the protection of their church. The city's newspapers continued to give the bombings front-page copy.

Finally the reign of terror came to an end. Detective Louis DeMatei, working closely with the Salesians, was put in charge of the entire operation. He devised an elaborate plan to catch the bombers. Police were stationed in

buildings adjacent to the church, in the rectory, and in the alley behind the church. An elaborate system of phones, buzzers, and call-bells was devised to link the men on guard. The parish 'Chronicle' of 1927 has supplied some interesting details:

Several picked men of the police department were stationed in nearby houses and in the church every night from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m.—eight men in the church itself and five in the adjacent apartments. ... Various devices were used to smuggle these men into the church so as to escape detection. Several were dressed as women, some appeared as worshippers, and some were smuggled in large laundry hampers and even a few in large innocent-looking bread containers.

The trap was now set. Meanwhile for several weeks announcements were run in various city and out-of-town newspapers that the police were now off the case since it appeared that the bombers had ceased their terrorist activity. But vigilant security continued. Two months had passed since the January bombing. The climax was approaching. Early on the morning of Sunday, March 6, the police spotted two men approaching the church from Powell St. As they drew near to the church the two split up. One paused across the street from the church and took his position as a lookout; the other stopped at church entrance. He was obviously concealing something under his coat.

Tension mounted. Detective DeMatei kept his attention focused on the man near the steps of the church. He was only twenty feet away from his slightly-opened window. The *San Francisco Examiner* described what happened next:

### Church Dynamiter Slain Firing Fuse

From the window of the church rectory, the police saw the man lay his package down close to the entryway wall. They observed him strike a match which flared brilliantly for a moment then died out. They saw him strike a second match and light the fuse. At that moment they sprang into action. A shot rang out. Seconds later the bomber lay dead in the street. His accomplice attempted to flee across the park in front of the church. Detective DeMatei yelled a warning to halt. The suspect ran on. A single shotgun blast was heard, and the suspect fell wounded.

The dead bomber was never identified. The wounded lookout refused to talk to the police and maintained his innocence until his death from the gunshot wound received five months earlier. After relentless investigation it was revealed that his name was Celsten Eklund, a World War I agitator who had come to San Francisco and was finally identified as the raving sidewalk preacher who

patronized the bars and dives in the Third and Howard Sts. area, at that time the armpit of San Francisco. The motive or identity of the actual bomber was never disclosed.

### Envoi

Three months later on May 23rd, 1927, Piperni experienced the joy of blessing the tower chimes, which put the finishing touch on the magnificent "Italian Cathedral of the West" which had been born out of his dreams and travails. On the following day, May 24, the entire city of San Francisco joined him in celebrating the 60th anniversary of his ordination. Again Archbishop Hanna delivered the homily. He addressed the jubilarian first in English and then in Italian to the cheering of a packed church. In the evening, an outdoor procession feted Fr. Piperni. A large float, bearing the statue of Mary Help of Christians, surrounded by twelve pages in Spanish court dress and decorated with Papal, Italian, and American flags was the centerpiece of the parade. A necklace of lights illuminated the church towers, its facade, and spelled out the dates: 1867-1927—Fr. Piperni's years of priesthood.

This gala event which highlighted Fr. Piperni's diamond jubilee also marked the end of his long odyssey. Thirty years before he had come to San Francisco expecting the worst and he got it. Now they were no longer throwing brickbats at him but bouquets. At his first Mass in the old church just a handful of worshippers had heard him say that he had not come to beg for their money but to ask for their souls. Now, aged and feeble, but blissful with joy, he listened to his archbishop in his new church extol his merits and laud the Salesians, describing how under his leadership they had transformed a community that had been rife with anticlericalism, now deeply attached to their Church.

The terrorist bombings of the past fourteen months and his declining health had taken their toll. Now 85 he asked to retire to the newly-opened junior seminary across the Bay in Richmond. Though stoop-shouldered and marked by lifelong fatigue, his mind was still sharp and his ways affable. Despite his numerous accomplishments which gave him a statewide reputation as the most renowned Italian Catholic leader of his day, he continued for the next three years to live the life of a humble Salesian, diligent in his religious duties and wrapped in prayer for hours on end.

On November 12, 1930, Fr. Piperni was stricken with pneumonia and rushed to St. Joseph hospital. Three days later he was dead.

When the bells of the twin towers of his beloved church tolled the sad announcement of his death, the press was loud in his praise. Even *L'Italia*, with whose half dozen editors Fr. Piperni had frequently crossed pens over the years, wrote respectful and even conciliatory editorials in his memory. But it was



William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner* that perhaps said it best. In its November 16, 1930 edition it reported:

A great missionary has died in San Francisco—Fr. Piperni. To the younger generation he was just a feeble old priest. To the discerning in these last inactive years, he was a man rapt in Divine Contemplation. If the truth is to be told, Father Piperni is the Salesian who saved the Italians of Northern California for the Faith. Other men worked valiantly with him, but they humbly concede to him the guerdon for starting the fight when it was hard to start.

Archbishop Edward Hanna, who had presided over Fr. Piperni's golden and diamond jubilee of ordination, conducted the obsequies. More than a hundred priests crowded into the sanctuary, and the church was packed to capacity. The governor of the state of California, the Honorable James Rolph, was in attendance, so was the mayor of San Francisco. The funeral cortege to Holy Cross cemetery wended its way slowly through thousands of the faithful who had come to pay their last respects.<sup>32</sup>

In a way the best eulogy was written years earlier by Fr. Piperni himself. Among his personal papers examined after his death, was a simple sheet of yellowing foolscap on which Fr. Piperni had reflected on his ministry of twenty years. He had written:

Twenty years have passed me by since I first began my ministry among the people of this parish. What, if anything, have I accomplished? If I had to present an audit of my position as administrator for some business firm, I could submit the hard facts in terms of profits and losses, in dollars and cents. Figures do not lie. But for a pastor to evaluate his spiritual gains and losses is impossible. However, this is what my balance sheet would reveal:

1. I have preached the word of God faithfully to my people.
2. I have administered the sacraments to them.
3. I have visited the sick in their homes and in the hospitals.

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<sup>32</sup> Fr. Piperni's remains were later interred in the Salesian cemetery in 1936 which in that year was located on the grounds of then Salesian Junior Seminary in Richmond, California. Salesian High School has since replaced the seminary site, and the cemetery, meticulously cared for amid beautiful surroundings, continues to be the resting place of the deceased Salesians of the San Francisco Province.

4. I have always seen to it that needy orphans were placed in safe homes or orphanages where they could be cared for with love.
5. I have looked after the elderly and found homes for them to live.
6. I have always done everything I could to see to it that widows with children received financial assistance.
7. I have found jobs for those who were out of work.
8. I have always supported the Catholic press by my writings and by advocating the reading of Catholic newspapers and magazines.

What more could one add?