

PROFILE

The providential hand of God



Gis was the third of three sisters, after Livia and Ginetta. Gisella, whom Chiara Lubich called Gis, was born in Lavis (Trent) where her father worked at the railway station. The religious education they received at home and in school,

In the first of this two-part article, New City looks at how Gis Calliari, one of the first group of young women who followed Chiara Lubich, discovered her vocation. Gis died earlier this year

gave them a deep sense of the values of honesty and moral uprightness.

Their father's death, after a short illness, made the three girls mature quickly. They were left without any support, but their mother's industriousness supported the family. They had to leave the railway house and settled in the outskirts of Trent, opposite the shrine of Our Lady of the Laste.

It was a shock for Gis when she had to spend six months in a clinic with tuberculosis. Gis recalls: 'They were difficult months. I was very ill and thought I would die. But later on, I understood that God had begun his work, he was preparing me...'

The 'perfect' job

Meanwhile, after finishing their studies by making great sacrifices, the girls started working. The war had just begun when Ginetta got a privileged offer from a rich landowner, a count who needed an administrator for his land and property. Immediately, she left her office job and moved to San Donà di Piave, in Veneto, to the nobleman's house, where she was given special treatment. In fact, she was fully included in the family's life and ate with them at the richly prepared table. Her employers came to love her to the point of accepting that Gis would join Ginetta to help her.

Besides supervising the business, they represented the owner in all the transactions regarding the land and were responsible for production management. In short, their presence became irreplaceable to the point that they were promised a mansion and land if they promised to stay.

Everything seemed to be going well, with a secure future ahead of them. However, they could not ignore the living conditions of the farmers and employees, whose livelihood depended on the count. They began to see this leading figure in society in a different way. Instead of admiring him for the house they lived in, they felt uneasy at such a meaningless life. They couldn't do much but without the family noticing, they took whatever leftovers they could from the dining table and gave it to the farmers, who had come to trust them.

'I'm not leaving you for another man...'

Meanwhile, the war came closer to Trent. It was bombed for the first time on September 2, 1943. Later on Gis understood that there was the providential hand of God guiding things in all those circumstances, which enabled her to stay in Trent. She met Chiara only a few days later. She recalled that her meeting with Chiara took place in Piazza Venezia, in the very centre of town. 'It was a brief introduction. We just exchanged a few words. I don't remember what was said. But it was not the words... it was the light of Jesus in her which captivated me! I had a boyfriend and I immediately wrote to him saying, "I am not leaving you for another man, but for God".'

From then on, every opportunity was taken to go and see Chiara. Gis' life changed completely. 'It was an ever new discovery of the Gospel, which Chiara took with her to the air raid shelters. Her words were words of fire, words that changed circumstances, places, people, everything, everything! There were no problems, no tiredness, there were no obstacles.'

After the bombing of Trent on 13th May 1944, a night they called 'stars and tears', Gis and Ginetta found a safe place for their mother in a village up in the mountains. Gis meanwhile had found work. But her heart was elsewhere – in the 'little house' (the first Focolare) in Piazza Cappuccini. 'I lived a few kilometres away, and the road was all uphill. I got up in the morning at five to go to Mass with Chiara at seven, before going to work. Then, during my lunch break, I rushed to Piazza Cappuccini, without saying anything to my sisters. Even Ginetta didn't know.'



Photo: Città Nuova

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Gis Calliari (right) with Chiara Lubich and Marco Tecilla

'We had chosen God'

One morning, after seeing her go up and down a few times without having a minute's break, Ginetta asked her straight out, 'Where have you been?' 'Look', Gis answered – 'I can't explain. The best thing would be if you came too.' Ginetta didn't need asking again and followed her. She saw and understood. 'I don't remember if we said much to each other. Without saying anything, we were one. We had chosen God, on our own and together.'

Gis explained: 'Everything was shared in Piazza Cappuccini. The war was on and there was a shortage of basic goods but we didn't want Chiara and the other focaline who were with her to lack anything.' The family owned an allotment about 15 kilometres from Trent, which yielded good fruit and vegetables, but how could they go and fetch it?

The only traffic on the road was tanks. 'I stood by the side of the road, saw one and put out my hand. The driver stopped and said, "What do you want?" "I need a lift."

He looked at me, very surprised. I don't think anyone had ever asked him that. "Ok, where do you want to go?" "I want to go to our allotment."

That is how it was. When we were near the allotment, I asked him to stop and got out. I filled my bag with as much as it could hold and on the way back I hitched a lift with another tank.' That was not the only time, Gis admitted. She admitted too that she never had the courage to tell Chiara about it. She didn't want her to worry about her lack of prudence. This just goes to show how difficulties never stopped her.

The war ended and their mother came back to Trent. She found that Gis and Ginetta were different. They had changed. There was something about them that disturbed her. After a while, she found out what she had already guessed and feared: both of them asked her permission to go and live with Chiara in Piazza Cappuccini. Their mother was adamant: Ginetta could go, Gis could not. 

(To be continued)