

Italian Jesuit Breaks Red Grip In Navy Arsenal

By FATHER JAMES L. TUCEK
(N.C.W.C. News Service)



The author of this article is head of the Rome bureau of the N.C.W.C. News Service. He has made a tour of southern Italy where he went to give a firsthand report on recent developments and interview the area's outstanding Catholic personalities.

(Taranto, Italy — Within five years a mild-mannered Jesuit priest has almost singlehandedly loosened the communists' grip on Italy's most important navy arsenal here and broken their 14-year-old domination of the town's communal and provincial governments.

He is Father Giuseppe Boccadamo, a small, soft-spoken priest of the Naples province of the Society of Jesus. His victory has been so devastating to communist strength in the whole area, formerly considered communism's strongest entrenchment in southern Italy, that the Red press has found it necessary to attack his work in print.

FATHER BOCCADAMO first came to Taranto in 1953, at the request of the National Organization for Religious and Moral Assistance to Workers (ONARMO) and with the permission of his superiors. He was confronted by

seemingly insuperable communist strength, to which was added passive resistance on the part of the arsenal's directors and skepticism from the local clergy.

Father Boccadamo recalls: "I was compelled to use a flanking maneuver. For two years, without ever officially entering the arsenal, I approached each worker individually, seeking him out in his home and making contact with his family. I sought them out in the hospitals and clinics when they were sick.

"I took an interest in their family needs and in their children. In the evenings I met with them in their parishes in Taranto and in the surrounding villages. They lived not only in Taranto but in about 40 small villages in the environs. Little by little they began to know me and be friendly."

In time it was the workers themselves who asked that Father Boccadamo be admitted into the arsenal as their chaplain. Under this pressure, the directors of the arsenal not only gave the priest permission to enter the closely guarded gates, but also supplied him with an office, a secretary, a car and a chauffeur.

Father James Tucek, director of N.C.W.C. News Service Rome Bureau, at his desk. Here he tells a story of how Italian priest single-handedly outwits the Communists.

The workers themselves built a beautiful chapel out of factory scraps. Bronze altar and tabernacle, candlesticks, kneelers, even a handwrought silver chalice and a ciborium were all made by the workers.

THE PRIEST'S workload increased rapidly and he was compelled to ask ONARMO to provide him with a number of assistants to help him make home contacts outside the arsenal. A dozen specially trained workers were supplied to him. Each worker

was assigned his own particular zone to make house calls and to organize social and training programs.

This officially approved and organized beginning was in May of 1955. May 1958—three years later—finds results undreamed of either by Father Boccadamo or the communist opposition.

When he arrived in Taranto in 1953, the internal commission (union representatives inside the shops) of the arsenal was divided

ed communist union, 26; Christian Democratic union, three; others, one. After the shop elections of May, 1956, the internal commission was divided: Christian Democrats, 16; Communists, 11, others, three.

A YEAR AFTER these elections, what had happened inside the arsenal was reflected in civilian life on the outside. Communist domination of local politics, which the Reds had held since 1944, was completely broken in the May, 1957, elections.

"This upset," said Father Boccadamo, "was without doubt due to many local, national and international factors. But we believe it was also the fruit of priestly labors among the workers and their families. That the communists also believed this, was indicated by their attacks."

When he arrived in 1953, the local clergy were pessimistic about what Father Boccadamo hoped to do. Although the ecclesiastical authorities were willing and anxious for him to go to work, they thought it hoping for too much to get a chaplain inside the arsenal.

In 1952 the pastors bewailed the absence of men in the churches and in parochial activities.

Today things are changed; many men are at Sunday Masses; men's participation in Catholic Action Activities is flourishing; the Apostleship of Prayer, organized by Father Boccadamo inside the arsenal, number 2,300 members with 62 leaders. The Christian Democratic labor union, which in 1953 had 800 card carriers, today has more than 4,000.

The entire civilian personnel entrusted to Father Boccadamo's care number about 13,000. They are employed in four principal

Italian Catholic Bishops Issue Election Statement

Rome — (RNS) — Italy's Roman Catholic bishops, in a joint statement urged Catholics to vote in the May 25-26 parliamentary elections "in conformity with the Catholic religion and the decrees of the Church."

establishments: the Navy Commissariat, Navy Engineers, Navy Munitions Depot and Navy Arsenal. Father Boccadamo has nothing to do with the servicemen, since they are cared for by their own chaplains.

The civilian personnel are those who are engaged in such tasks as tailoring, cooking, engineering, tooling, munitions storage and maintenance, fire prevention and so on.

THE LARGEST of these four establishments, the most complex and the most important is the arsenal, where Father Boccadamo has his office. However, he is given free movement throughout all four. At the arsenal there are about 8,000 civilians. It is a city more than a military base, covering about 3,700 acres. Really a city within the city of Taranto, a city which is the nerve center of Taranto and which gives Taranto its prestige as an important industrial center of southern Italy.

Whoever can influence the thinking and conduct of the personnel inside the arsenal exerts an influence on the city, the environs and even in some measure, a great section of southern Italy. The communists knew this, and so did Father Boccadamo. Their motives for wanting this power of influence was to further the cause of the communist revolution; his to save souls.

Father Boccadamo's day begins at 6:30 a.m. as he enters the arsenal and goes to his

office to hear confessions. He celebrates Mass at 7 for the workers who must be in the shops at 7:45. From 8 to 9 he receives the workers who call at his office. He makes the rounds of the various shops from 9 to 12:30, maintaining constant contact with the workers. From 3:30 to 4:30 he teaches religion in the apprentice and technical schools on the Arsenal grounds.

Back in his office at 4:30, he handles correspondence and requests for various kinds of assistance up until 6:00.

In the evenings he goes to one or another of the outlying villages to conduct various classes and meetings. On the evenings when there is no such meeting, he visits the sick and the workers' families.

To combat communism on ideological grounds, Father Boccadamo has started two circulating libraries, one for the workers and one for the apprentices in the shop schools. To provide for the combined social and religious needs of the workers' children, he has organized summer camps at the seaside and in the mountains.

COMMUNISTS INSIDE the arsenal for a while succeeded in opposing Father Boccadamo by means of speech rallies and meetings held during the lunch hour. Typically, the quiet Jesuit rendered this tactic powerless with a double-edged program. He organ-

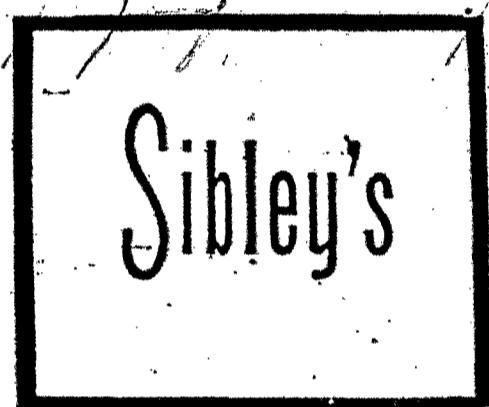
ized a soccer league inside the arsenal. Lunch hours were spent in games, practicing or in league games. Soon even the communists were abandoning the rallies to go and root for their team.

Father Boccadamo has organized a 65-piece orchestra and chorus among the workers. Periodically he arranges pilgrimages and tours for the workers' families. So far he has held two four-day spiritual retreats with 80 men participating in each. There have also been 11 overnight weekend retreats with an average of 400 participants in each.

There is such an active program of religious, social and educational functions now going on inside the arsenal that few workers have time to bother about communism anymore.

THIS YEAR ON the feast of St. Joseph the Worker, Bishop Guglielmo Motolese of Taranto administered first Holy Communion and Confirmation to 230 workers, student workers and workers' children inside the arsenal itself. Two years ago, during the diocesan Eucharistic Congress in Taranto, His Eminence Eugene Tisserant, Dean of the Sacred College of Cardinals, celebrated Mass inside the arsenal and 4,000 received Communion, many of whom had not been to the sacraments in 20 or 30 years.

In the last two years more than a thousand crucifixes have been made by the workers themselves and have been placed in every shop and office on the base. These were to replace the crucifixes which were gathered up in 1945 and thrown into the sea.



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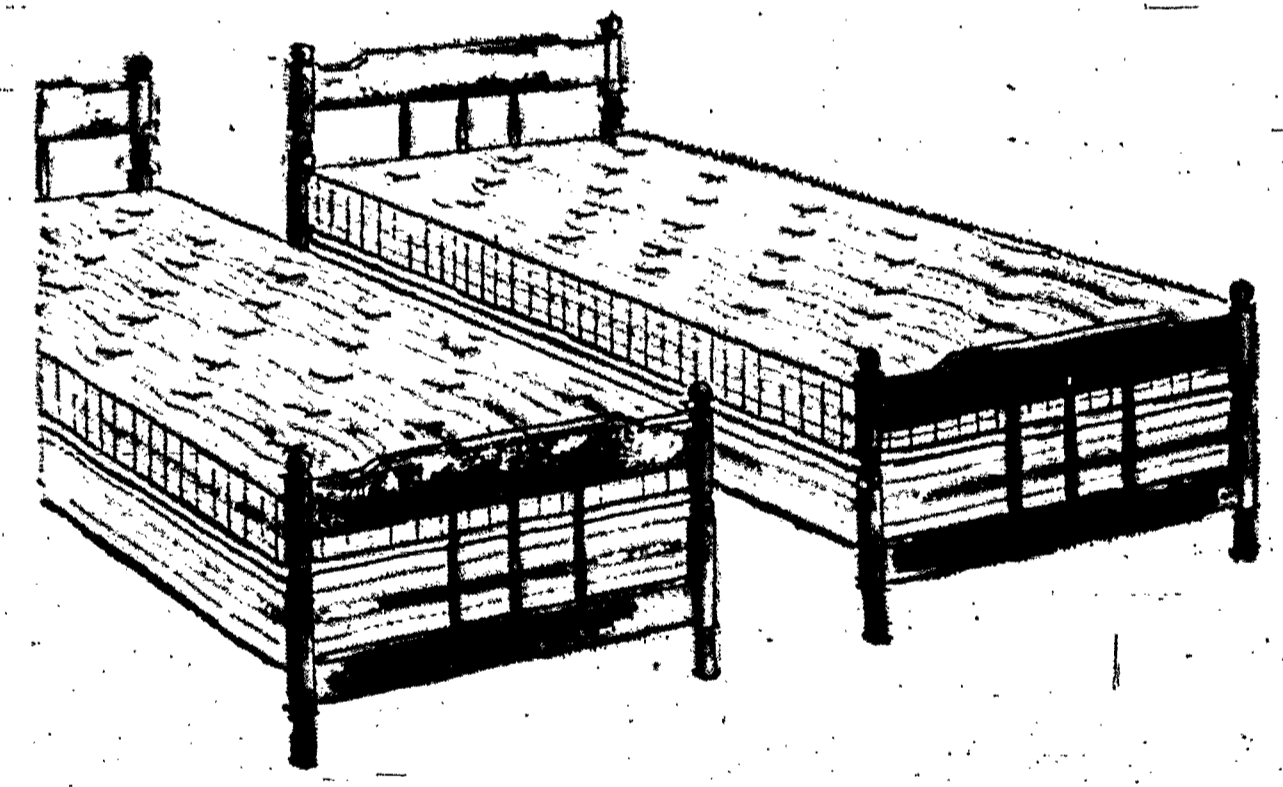


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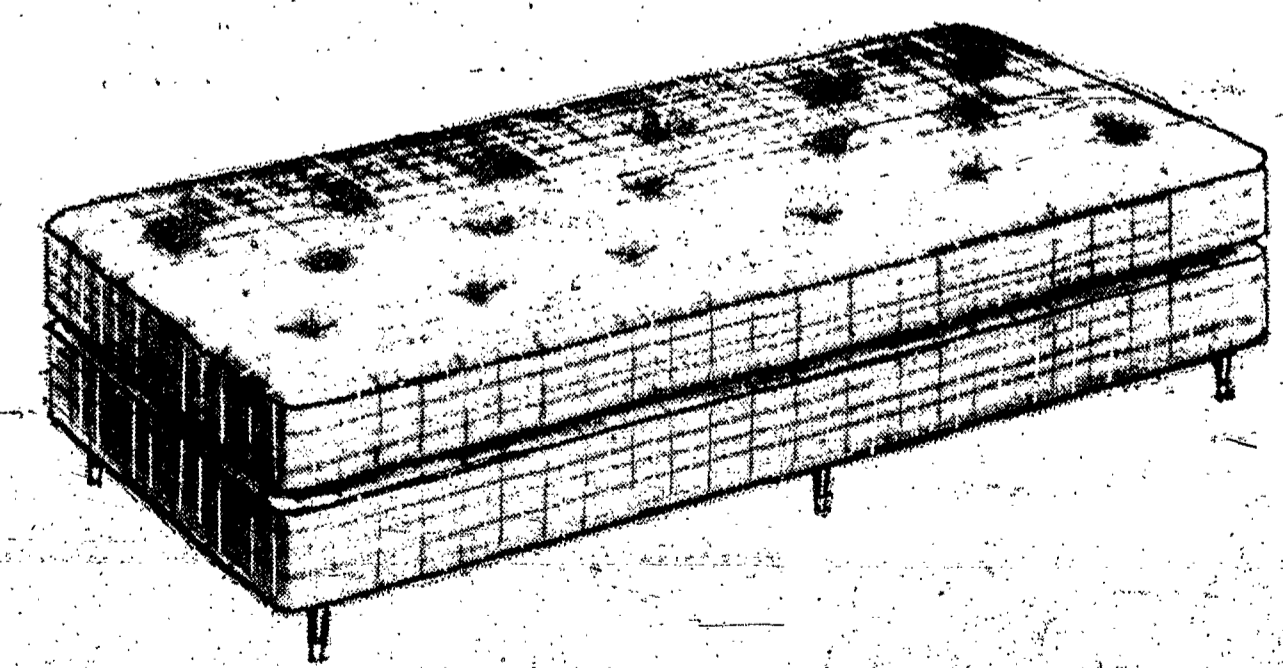
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