

# Bible Student Beginnings in Italy

## A Beginning

Both "*The Divine Plan of The Ages*" and the first issues of the Italian Watch Tower were financed by some Waldensians. Waldesians were among the first Bible Students in Italy.

### Rivoire (1858-1911)

[See ZWT February 1, 1905, page 47, R3505]

In 1891, Charles Taze Russell, who did outstanding work among true Christian worshipers, visited Europe for the first time. During a stopover in Pinerolo, Italy (situated in one of the picturesque valleys in the Cottian Alps, known as the "Waldensian Valleys"), Brother Russell met Professor Daniele Rivoire, a former gospel evangelist of a group called the Waldenses who taught languages at the Waldensian cultural center of Torre Pellice.

Rivoire remained closely associated with the Waldenses. In 1903, he translated Brother Russell's first volume, "*The Divine Plan of the Ages*" into Italian. He had the book printed at his own expense at the Tipografia Sociale in 1904. This was before an Italian edition came out in the United States. In his 1904 edition, Professor Rivoire wrote the following note to its readers: "We place this first Italian edition under the Lord's protection. May he bless it so that, in spite of its imperfections, it may contribute to magnify his most holy name and encourage his Italian-speaking children to greater devotion. May the hearts of all those who, by reading this book, appreciate the depth of riches, wisdom, and knowledge of God's plan and love, be grateful to God himself, by whose grace publication of this work has been made possible. —Pinerolo, 20 December 1903"

Rivoire also began translating *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence* into Italian. This magazine was published quarterly in 1903 and was printed at Pinerolo. Interestingly, the magazine was distributed through the regular channels to the chief newsagents in the most important provincial centers. Professor Rivoire was the only translator to have direct correspondence with Brother Russell and actively spread the message throughout Italy. For all the material received, he wrote: "I am aiming only to render it as faithfully as we can to be the author's thought." He remained the central contact in Italy for translating *Zion's Watch Tower* until 1906 when he immigrated to America and settled in Boston.

### Banchetti (1866-1926)

Another Waldensian pastor who esteemed C.T. Russell's publications was Giuseppe Banchetti. Giuseppe's father, who had converted from Catholicism, gave him a Waldensian education. In 1894, Giuseppe became a pastor and ministered to various Waldensian communities in Apulia and Abruzzi and on the islands of Elba and Sicily.

The American Italian version of "*The Divine Plan of the Ages*" was published in 1905. Banchetti wrote an enthusiastic review of the book. It appeared in the Protestant periodical *La Rivista Cristiana*. Banchetti wrote: "For us [this] is the most illuminated and sure guide that any Christian may find to undertake a profitable and blessed study of Holy Scripture. ...As soon as I read it, it seemed as though scales fell from my eyes, that the way to God was straighter and easier. Even apparent contradictions for the most part disappeared. Doctrines once difficult appeared simple and perfectly acceptable. Things hitherto incomprehensible became clear. The admirable plan of the world's salvation in Christ appeared before me with such awesome simplicity as to induce me to exclaim with the Apostle: O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"—Romans 11:33.

Banchetti showed “much sympathy” for the work of the Bible Students and was “fully convinced” of the doctrines as explained by them. In his own way, Banchetti also sought to make such doctrines known. It is evident from Banchetti’s writings that he believed that there would be an earthly resurrection, as taught in the Scriptures. He also agreed with the Bible Students when he explained that the year in which Jesus died had been fixed and revealed by God in Daniel’s prophecy of the 70 weeks. (Daniel 9:24-27) More than once, and in open disagreement with the teachings of his church, he held that the Memorial of Jesus Christ’s death should be observed just one time each year, “the exact day on which the anniversary falls.” (Luke 22:19, 20) He rejected Darwin’s theory of evolution, and he affirmed that true Christians should not engage in secular war.—Isaiah 2:4.

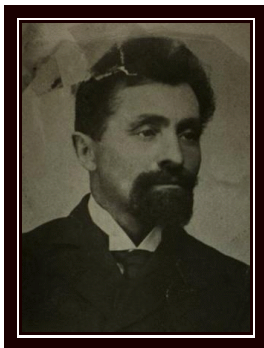
On one occasion, Banchetti was discussing Russell’s writings with a man named J. Campbell Wall. In answer to Wall’s criticisms, Banchetti said: “I am certain that if you read Russell’s six volumes, you would experience a vigorous and deep joy, and you would thank me with emotion. I do not parade doctrine; but I read those books eleven years ago, and I thank God every day for putting before me such light and such consolation by means of a work that is entirely and solidly founded on the Holy Scriptures.”

It is significant that these two Waldensian pastors—Daniele Rivoire and Giuseppe Banchetti—expressed appreciation for the way Pastor Russell explained the Bible. Banchetti wrote: “I say that none of us Evangelicals, not even our pastors or theology professors, nobody knows everything. Nay, we have many, many other things to learn. ... [We should] ... stay and listen, not thinking we know it all, and not rejecting what is offered for our examination. Rather, listen, listen, listen.”

### **A Congregation Formed**

In the meantime, Fanny Lugli, a Waldensian of San Germano Chisone, near Pinerolo, received a book called “*The Divine Plan of the Ages*” from relatives in America. By 1903 she had recognized the book’s contents as being the truth and was conducting meetings with a small group of persons at her home. In 1908 the first congregation was formed in Italy. The meetings were held on Thursday evenings at Pinerolo, in Piazza Montebello 7, the home of Sister Cerulli, and on Sunday afternoons at Gondini near San Germano Chisone, at Sister Lugli’s. During this same period, Clara Cerulli Lantaret and Giosuè Vittorio Paschetto also came to a knowledge of the truth, and Remigio Cuminetti joined them a few years later.

When Brother Russell came back to Italy in 1912 to visit the only existing congregation, there were about 40 persons attending the meetings. At that time the work was superintended by the Swiss branch office of the Watch Tower Society. Sister Cerulli, who could speak English and French as well as Italian, represented the Swiss branch in Italy.



Daniele Rivoire



Fanny Lugli



Giuseppe Banchetti

**Giovanni DeCecca**

## Pursuing My Purpose in Life

As told by Giovanni DeCecca

CALITRI, Italy, was my birthplace, on December 29, 1879. My devout parents had me baptized and later confirmed as a Roman Catholic. Little did we expect that today, at the age of eighty, I would fondly look back at fifty-four years as one of Jehovah's witnesses.



After my confirmation, I used to wonder and finally inquired of our priest: "What must I do as a Christian to please God?" He replied: "Be a good man, attend mass regularly, go to confession, repeat the rosary, contribute all you can to the church and do what I tell you." His answer did not satisfy me. It seemed selfish and wrong to be interested just in myself. Why not try to help others and make the world better?

About this time my father brought home a Bible and began to read it to us. I had never seen one before and wondered if it would help me be a good Christian. As father read to us from day to day, I became deeply interested and longed to read the Bible myself. Having been a shepherd boy from the age of five and without schooling, I could not read. When father taught me how, I spent many happy hours reading this good Book. While many things were not clear, I realized that what the priests were telling me did not agree with God's Word. Trying to talk to my priest about the Bible was very disappointing. He told me it was not my business to understand and teach the Bible; that was his business! He would tell me all I would need to know to be a real Christian. Then he told me to come to confession. I went, but there was nothing to confess. Very displeased, my priest spoke terrible things about purgatory and eternal torment and other matters not suitable for the ears of a boy in his teens. I was very much disgusted. When told to put something in the collection box to pay for the services of the priest, I contributed two cents, and later regretted that.

As we continued reading the Bible, father decided that we would not go to mass any more. His decision brought great opposition from our relatives and former friends. The priests told them not to have anything to do with us because we would lead them astray. We joined the local Baptist church, where we learned that purgatory was not mentioned in the Bible, nor did it say anything about going to mass or praying to the "saints." The minister told us that we should pray to God and confess our sins to Him. I was glad to learn these things, but the doctrine of eternal torment bothered me. Our minister could not give a satisfactory Scriptural answer. This was a great disappointment to me, because the thought of suffering forever in a place of torment distressed me very much. I continued to read the Bible, hoping to find someone who could answer my questions.

In 1900, when I was twenty-one, we moved to the United States, settling in Connecticut. I secured work to help support the family and immediately began to study English, with the aid of an Italian-English dictionary. Learning to speak and read English, I felt at home in America. Here I continued to read the Bible, still hoping someone would help me understand it.

In 1904 my hope was realized when a Watch Tower colporteur visited my place of work offering Bible-study helps. From her I obtained the first three volumes of Studies in the Scriptures. The first volume, called "*The Divine Plan of the Ages*," opened up the glorious message of the Bible to me in a remarkable way. I was so happy I wanted to tell everyone that I had found the truth. How wonderful it was! My worries about eternal torment were over, for God's inspired Book plainly says the "wages of sin is death," not torment. I learned that God's kingdom, for which Jesus taught us to pray, will bring eternal life and perfect happiness to all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and serve him faithfully. What a message to bring to the people!

My first efforts to circulate these wonderful books were not very successful, because I did not know how to go about it. When I tried to interest my Baptist minister by telling him that hell is not a place of eternal torment, he asked: "If hell is taken out of the Bible, what do we have left?" I replied: "We have Christ our Savior, who redeemed us from the curse of death, and his thousand-year reign that will bring peace, happiness and everlasting life to those who obey him." That ended the discussion.

At Asbury Park, New Jersey, during the 1906 convention of Bible Students, I met several hundred dedicated Christians well versed in the Scriptures. I shall never forget how these friendly people talked about the Bible all the time and were ready and able to answer my questions. If I could always be with this kind of people, how happy I would be! There I met Brother Charles Russell, president of the Watch Tower Society. I asked him if I could work at the Society's headquarters. After hearing of my experiences in Italy and how I learned the truth in America, he advised me to take up colportering first and perhaps a place could be found for me later at headquarters. I was baptized that year, but did not feel ready for colporteur service. Then a brother going into that work asked me to join him. I did, and soon learned how to place the Bible-study helps. By Jehovah's undeserved kindness I even gave a public talk in Italian to an audience of four hundred in Roseto, Pennsylvania.

Meanwhile the Society's headquarters had moved from Allegheny, Pennsylvania, to Brooklyn, New York. In December, 1909, I was invited to work in the Brooklyn Bethel. What a privilege to be a member of this dedicated family! Before a year passed I was assigned to serve the nearby Italian people, who showed much interest in God's kingdom. None of them could give public talks, so I did what I could, and the Lord blessed my efforts. Frequent lectures were arranged in Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

After I had gained some experience in this work, the Society sent me on regular "pilgrim" trips to distant places. On one such assignment to St. Louis a number of Catholic youths came to the meeting with stones in their pockets ready to throw at me if they did not like what was said. No stones were thrown, but after listening to the talk some remained to ask Bible questions and became interested in the truth.

In Rochester, a man came up to me after the lecture and engaged me in heated discussion for over an hour. He left convinced we had the truth and later became a full-time pioneer minister. He is still faithful in Jehovah's work. During another lecture, in Springfield, Massachusetts, some rowdies came up on the platform and tried to interfere. I talked louder than they did, and the audience kept listening attentively. Finally the troublemakers left. Two families who attended that lecture later became ministers of the good news.

Early in 1914, the Society's Photo-Drama of Creation was shown to the English-speaking people, accompanied by recorded explanatory talks. When these talks were later translated into Italian, I was invited to read them while the pictures were being shown. Knowing that it took two hours to present each of the Drama's four parts, I wondered if I could handle it. Since Jehovah had blessed my feeble efforts at public speaking, I was anxious to try. He gave me strength, and I got along well. Thousands attended the showings and many left their names requesting more Bible information. Others shared with me in the joyful work of calling on these people in the Bethel area and furthering their interest.

One sister in the truth, Grace Harris, impressed with the zeal and energy that I gladly put into the Drama talks, fell in love with the speaker. We were married by Brother Russell in 1916. Grace has been a real helpmate to me for over forty years and still is. For all this I am very grateful to Jehovah.

When the Drama had served its purpose, it left me more time to devote to my duties in the Society's Italian department translating letters and helping with correspondence. It was wonderful to be at the Bethel home! Then, in 1916, we all received a great shock. Brother Russell died on the train that was bringing him back from a West Coast lecture tour. 'What shall we do now?' many asked. We believed Brother Russell was "that servant" of Matthew 24:45-47, in whose care all Kingdom interests were entrusted. Was our work finished or should we continue to preach the good news as we had done during his earthly lifetime? A few became discouraged and quit, but the majority kept on working and were richly blessed by the Lord.

... [In 1918] a group of ministers of false religion urged the United States government to halt the work of the Society on the grounds that its officers were disloyal to the war effort. It was asserted that our preaching God's kingdom as the only hope and pointing out World War I as a fulfillment of prophecy was likely to discourage men from going to war. The charges caused the arrest and trial of the Society's officers and associates for not taking an active part in the war. For counseling my young brother on the proper manner of requesting classification as a minister, which he was, I became a defendant in the case.

We were given what was to be later proved an unfair trial. Off we went to the Federal prison in Atlanta, Georgia. While the others received very long sentences, mine was comparatively short. Brother Macmillan, one of my fellow defendants, still says this was due to my being shorter in stature than the others. In the prison tailor shop I found a number of other Italians serving time for counterfeiting money. I witnessed to them about God's kingdom of peace and perfection for mankind. Some listened with appreciation; others thought it was too good to be true.

Justice began to triumph, and we were released from Atlanta in the spring of 1919, later to be fully exonerated. Returning to Brooklyn, we were received by many friends who gathered to greet us. It was a happy family reunion. That September, at Cedar Point, Ohio, over 7,000 dedicated friends assembled in convention to learn, if possible, what the Lord would have us do. To our delight we saw from the Bible that a great work was yet to be done in preaching the Kingdom message to the nations. We returned to Cedar Point for another convention in 1922, where all were electrified with the prospects of greater things ahead. Grace and I rejoiced to have a full-time share in this ever-increasing Kingdom work.

We were busy at our Bethel assignments and the years raced swiftly by. We attended many conventions of Jehovah's people, such as the ones in Columbus in 1931 and 1937, St. Louis in 1941, Los Angeles in 1947, and the first big assembly in New York's Yankee Stadium in 1950. All were joyful experiences as we saw God prospering the growth of his earthly organization.

In 1951, and again in 1955, the Society and our friends made it possible for us to visit Italy, where I had the joy of speaking to a number of congregations of our brothers. During the 1955 trip we were among several thousand who toured Europe attending conventions in many cities. The assembly in Rome at the beautiful auditorium originally intended to glorify Mussolini was a praise to Jehovah's name and deeply impressed the people of Rome.

Back in Brooklyn my wife and I are happy to have a regular part in the door-to-door, back-call and home Bible study work. We also appreciate the importance of attending the meetings and assemblies provided by Jehovah. Though sometimes tired at meeting time, we always return home greatly refreshed.

Reviewing fifty-four years spent in Jehovah's service, I can truthfully say these have been the happiest years of my life. Fifty-one of them have been as a member of the Brooklyn Bethel family—a privilege of service I wholeheartedly recommend to any young Christian. To be sure, there have been some trials, but these increased our faith in Jehovah. I have never doubted that he is using the Society to direct the world-wide witness work that Jesus foretold at Matthew 24:14. As Paul said, any tribulations “do not amount to anything in comparison with the glory that is going to be revealed in us.”—Rom. 8:18.

Our great hope is to have part in God's new world of righteousness, where we can praise and serve him forever. With Jehovah's help, we shall successfully pursue this blessed purpose in life.