

Guido Bosio

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# MARTYRS IN CHINA

Bishop Luigi Versiglia and Fr Callisto Caravario

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through their writings  
and testimonies of  
their contemporaries

HISTORICAL PROFILE

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ELLE DI CI – LEUMANN (TURIN)

## INTRODUCTION

*In the summer of 1933, Salesian missionary Fr Larena Bassano, Bishop Versiglia's secretary, asked me to write up the heroic conclusion to the life of Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario, making use of 26 eyewitness reports he had collected. He also gave me the diary and other writings of Fr Caravario, as well as those of Bishop Versiglia, which he had brought from China. Once back in the Mission, he sent me copious photographic documentation.*

*In 1935 my book was published, its Italian title being Mons. Versiglia e Don Caravario, Testimonianze sull'eccidio di Li Tow Tsui. It was the story of the murder of the two missionaries, with a brief historical outline attached.*

*The subject interested me. Fr Caravario had been a companion of mine. I had spoken with Bishop Versiglia on many occasions, asking him for news of my brother Salesian priest who had been with him since 1919 and had always kept me up to date with news of the missionary work through his letters, and by regularly sending me the Mission news sheet, the Inter Nos. I had a collection of them.*

*I gave a number of conferences with slides, in order to make the two missionaries and their heroic end known.*

*Missionaries, confreres and Salesian superiors encouraged me to see to a complete life of the two missionaries.*

*I established contact with the Caravario family, spoke often with his mother, who gave me Fr Callisto's 82 letters, which she had jealously preserved. His sister Vica sent me written memories of her brother. I wrote to people whom I knew had been in contact with Fr Caravario, asking them for news and letters from him. Fr Garelli, Fr Callisto's Rector and guide when he had been a boy in Turin, and then cleric in Shanghai, gave me the manuscript of Fr Caravario's life which he had written. I had sufficient documentation on Fr Caravario.*

*By examining the Year Books (Elenco) of the Salesian Congregation from 1888 to 1905, I had the addresses of all of Bishop Versiglia's school friends and where he had worked. I wrote some 120 letters asking for news. I received seventy five reports which I have indicated under the heading of Memorie (Memoirs). From the Bollettino Salesiano (Italian Salesian Bulletin) and Inter Nos, I collected reports Bishop Versiglia had written on the missionary work of the Salesians in China from 1906 to 1929, and from other sources of information I could find on the subject.*

*Then the Second World War broke out in Europe. Obedience took me away from the quiet environment of school and study, and the life of the two first Salesian martyrs remained a work in progress. I entrusted the most valuable documents to the Salesian Central Archives (the writings of Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario) and later on, I gave all the other documentation to the Congregation's Postulation, so it could assist in the procedure for the Cause of Beatification.*

*Thirty years went by. At the beginning of October 1973, the Rector Major, Fr Ricceri, invited me once again to take up the life of our two glorious confreres, in view of the promulgation of the decree on their martyrdom. I re-established contact with the documents: I found all of them, including the most insignificant sketches of work. In addition, I had at my disposal the documents of*

*the Salesian Central Archives and the proceedings of the Beatification process. I found Bishop Versiglia's mother's memoirs in Fr Braga's deposition. In 1930 had been in contact with the Versiglia family, just as I had done with Fr Caravario's family.*

*The specialised library of the Consolata Missionary Institute in Turin offered me an abundant and select bibliography on the story of China and the Missions in that vast land.*

*This current work is none other than the chaining together of primary documentation: the writings of the two martyrs and the testimonies of people who had studied and worked with them, set in their time. The letters deserve a separate study. I have introduced as many of them as needed to give the account a soul, which is the soul of its two main characters.*

*The story of the Salesian Work in China in its first twenty five years develops around the figure of Bishop Versiglia. In the background one sees the troubled history of China in the first thirty years of our century, characterised by serious upheavals and profound socio-political transformations.*

*The story is chronological; but it seems to me that alongside the events themselves, it is the figures of the two saints which gradually develop and stand out, their heroic end being ultimately rewarded with the crown of martyrdom.*

*Turin-Valsalice, Christmas 1976*

*Fr Guido Bosio*

## MANUSCRIPT SOURCES

### **Bishop Versiglia**

*Letters:* To Fr Eugenio Bianchi, master of novices (dated from 1888 to 1894); to Fr Giulio Barberis, spiritual director of personnel in formation (1889–1920); to Fr Calogero Gusmano, Secretary of the Superior Council (1904–1925); to Fr Pietro Cogliolo, Provincial of Salesian works in Portugal and Macao (1910–1911); to Fr Emanuele Manassero, Provincial of the China Mission (1912–1913); to Fr Michael Rua (1902–1910); to Fr Paul Albera (1910–1920); to Fr Philip Rinaldi (1923–1930); to Fr Peter Ricaldone (1924–1929); to the Carmel in Florence (1923–1930). Letters to various others.

*Written accounts (Memorie)* by Bishop Emanuele Federico, Bishop Rotolo Salvatore; by priests: Alesina Carlo, Alieri Temistocle, Anedda Severino, Angeleri Giacomo, Antoniazzi Biagio, Antonioli Francesco, Aureli Alessandro, Bandini Serafino, Barberis Alessio, Battezzati Eusebio, Bertolucci Amilcare, Bistolfi Giuseppe, Bonfanti Massimino, Boschi Gaetano, Bosio Stefano, Brioschi Marco, Buffa Giovanni, Calcagno Angelo, Cannì Giuseppe, Catanzariti Carlo, Cavasin Antonio, Ceria Eugenio, Chiapello Tommaso, Costa Lodovico, Divina Giuseppe, Ercolini Domenico, Faccaro Giovanni, Farina Gerolamo, Festini Giuseppe, Fracchia Pietro, Frigo Carlo, Ganio Ferdinando, Garelli Sante, Ghibaudo Giuseppe, Giannantonio Domenico, Ginzotti Agostino, Giraudi Abbondio, Graziani Antonio, Guala Giuseppe, Latini Giacomo, Lovisolò Zaverio, Manassero Emanuele, Mancini Argeo, Mazzetti Giovanni, Mezzacasa Giacomo, Nervi Tommaso, Nigra Lorenzo, Pastorino Paolo, Pavoni Ettore, Pomati Pietro, Purita Michele, Rigoni Matteo, Rinaldi Alfonso, Rinaldi Augusto, Rossi Carlo, Rossi Luigi, Salvatico Magno, Savoia Alfredo, Ségala Giovanni, Simona Carlo, Terrone Luigi, Trevisan Pietro, Usai Antonio.

*House Chronicle of the Immaculate Conception Orphanage in Macao* (1912–1927)

### **Fr Caravario**

*Diary*, from October 1924 to 16 April 1929.

*Letters to his mother*, from 8 October 1924 to 13 February 1930.

*Letters to his brother Andrea, Fr Carlo Braga, Fr Eusebio Battezzati, Fr Paolo Stacul, young Giuseppe Canonica* and others.

*Memoirs of his sister Vica.*

*Vita di Don Cavario*, manuscript by Fr Sante Garelli, Fr Caravario's Rector in Turin (St Joseph's Oratory) and in Shanghai.

*Written accounts (Memorie)* by priests: Alessio Barberis (together with Versiglia), Eusebio Battezzati (together with Versiglia), Carlo Braga, Giuseppe Canonica, Antonio De Amicis, Pietro Lignetti, Erminio Rossetti, Antonio Villa, Pietro Zerbino; Salesian Bro. Luigi Prandi and others.

## ARCHIVAL AND PROCEDURAL SOURCES

The Ordinary Process in the Shiu-chow Vicariate (13 December 1934–8 October 1935); Apostolic Process, Hong Kong (14 July 1953–18 March 1954); Apostolic Process, Turin (21 September 1953–17 April 1957). Process proceedings indicated by title: *Summarium super martyrio* (abbrev.:

Summ.). A *Summarium responsioni additum*, Rome, 25 June 1974, was added to the *Responsio ad animadversiones* (abbrev.: Summ. resp. add.). Salesian Central Archives and other documents.

### ONE CYCLOSTAT SOURCE

Mario Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico sull'Opera Salesiana in Cina, Parte I* (1906–1930), cyclostat, Aberdeen Technical School, Hong Kong, 1973, pp. 218.

Salesian Father Mario Rassiga made his novitiate at Shiu-chow and Macao (1924–25), did his philosophical and theological studies in Macao and Hong Kong (1925–31). Ordained priest in 1931, he worked as a missionary in the Shiu-chow Vicariate until 1950 and then in the Salesian Province Centre Hong Kong until today. Other than his lifetime of personal experience, he employed first-hand sources for his work: written House chronicles from Salesian Houses and Missions in China, personal diaries of missionaries.

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Guido Bosio, *Mons. Versiglia e Don Caravario, Testimonianze sull'eccidio di Li-tow-tsui*, Turin 1935, pp. 200.

Carlo Antonio Kirschner, *Dom Bosco e a China*, Contributo para a Historia dos Salesianos, Macao 1970, pp. 370.

*Luigi Versiglia, vescovo e martire*. A single edition published by the Diocese of Tortona for the centenary of birth of Bishop Versiglia, Tortona 1973, pp. 54.

## **ESSENTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Louis Wei Tsing-Sing, *Le Saint Siège et la Chine de Pie XI à nos jours*, Editions A. Allais, Paris 1968, pp. 470.

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### **2. Chinese mentality and Christianity**

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

*Annali*: Annals of the Salesian Society

*Arch. Sal.*: Archivio Centrale Salesiano

*Boll. Sal.*: Bollettino Salesiano

*MB*: Memorie Biografiche di San Giovanni Bosco (in other words, references are to the Italian, not the English edition)

*Cronaca di Macao*: House chronicle of the Immaculate Conception Orphanage at Macao (1912–1927)

*Summ.*: *Summariium super martyrio*. Proceedings of the Ordinary Process at Shiu-chow (pp. 1–255), of the Apostolic Process in Hong Kong (pp. 255–299) and Turin (pp.300–439).

*Summ. resp. add.*: Summary added to the reply to observations of the Promoter of the Faith.

For the romanisation of geographical names I have used the map of the Apostolic Vicariate of Shiu-chow, published by the Divine Word Society geographical dept., San Gabriele near Vienna, edited by Bishop Ignazio Canazei, Bishop Versiglia's successor. It has been reproduced in black and white in this work. For the handful of names of other regions I have followed the English romanisation of the Postal Guide, Ministry of Communications, China, published in Shanghai in 1919.

**Translator's note**: The Italian 'Luigi' and 'Callisto' have been retained for the two Salesian Protomartyrs, St Luigi Versiglia and St Callisto Caravario respectively. Technically, the former is 'Aloysius' and the latter 'Callistus'. In the case of the former, both Italian and English have a variety of shortened versions for 'Aloysius', e.g. Aloisio, Luigi, Luigino, Lodovico, Vico, Alvisè, Gino ... for Italian, and Louis, Lewis, Lou, Louie (dimin) ... for English. It seemed better to simply stay with the term by which Versiglia is better known: Luigi. Callisto is obviously derived from the Latin 'Callistus', but again, he was named 'Callisto', so let's keep to it!

Footnotes have been minimally translated to assist the reader who does not know Italian.

## DON BOSCO AND CHINA

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### A chalice filled with blood

#### A chalice filled with blood

A group of missionaries, destined for the new Mission of Shiu-chow in Kwang-tun, which had been entrusted to the Salesians in 1918, left from Valdocco, cradle of Salesian work, on 20 June of that year.<sup>1</sup>

While farewelling them, the Rector Major, the gentle and saintly figure of Fr Paul Albera, gave them a valuable chalice as a gift for the new Mission. He had used it to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at the solemn fiftieth anniversary of his First Mass and the consecration of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians.<sup>2</sup>

During the reception which the Salesians in Macao offered the new missionaries, Fr Sante Garelli presented Fr Versiglia, Superior of the new Mission, with the Rector Major's gift, accompanied by kind thoughts of homage and best wishes.

“Fr Versiglia listened attentively, yes,” Fr Garelli indicates, “but his eyes were clearly on a distant vision which went beyond the gift I still held in my hands. Then he spoke: ‘Don Bosco’, he said, ‘saw a time in China when the chalice would be filled with blood, the Salesian Work would spread marvellously among this immense people. You are giving me the chalice our Father saw: it is up to me to fill it with blood in order to fulfil the vision.’”

“It is not easy to say how we sat with those words” Fr Garelli went on to say. “We all had a feeling that it was a prophecy, and were caught up in the tremendous clash between wanting to wish them well and wanting to see that this was not fulfilled.”<sup>3</sup>

Some twenty days later, on 12 October 1918, Fr Versiglia wrote to Fr Albera: “Beloved Father, you also wanted to remind me in a very special way: you sent me a chalice which is your own. The chalice is the symbol of priesthood ... May it be an encouragement for me to emulate the priestly zeal of the good father who offered it to me! ... Our Venerable Father Don Bosco, when he dreamed about China, saw two chalices filled with the sweat and blood of his sons ... May the Lord see that I give back the chalice offered me to my superiors and to the Pious Society, but filled, if not with my blood, then at least with my sweat!”<sup>4</sup>

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1 See further ahead for this missionary expedition and the voyage. Chapters 10 and 11 deal with the assigning of the Kwang-tun Mission to the Salesians.

2 *La Messa d'oro di Don Albera e l'imposizione dell'aureo scettro a Maria Ausiliatrice* are described in the Boll. Sal. June-July 1918, pp. 116–121. The *Bollettino Salesiano* dedicated a special number to the double events of the jubilee of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians (9 June 1918) and the Golden Jubilee Mass of Fr Albera, celebrated on the same day. It was issued in May 1918. Cf. also *Annali*, IV, 88-92.

3 *Memorie di Don Sante Garelli*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

4 *Lettere a Don Paolo Albera*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.



The sacrifice, which on that day was a distant premonition and a generous gift of self, became a glorious reality 12 years later on 25 February! While the halo of these two Blesseds crowned Don Bosco's head, the chalice he saw overflowed with the blood of two of his sons, who who joined their Father in glory through martyrdom: Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario.

### Salesian written and oral tradition

The dream to which Fr Versiglia referred does not exist in the Salesian written tradition which the historians of the Congregation, Frs Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Angelo Amadei, and Eugenio Ceria had collected in the nineteen volumes of the *Biographical Memoirs* and the four volumes of the *Annali (Annals)*. Fr Versiglia had taken it from the oral tradition, very much alive at Foglizzo where he had been a novice, then assistant and teacher, and of which we have sure testimonies.

Fr Ceria<sup>5</sup>, when questioned about it, replied on 6 February 1944: "There are no dreams about China. There are hints in the missionary dreams ... I recall there was talk of the two chalices; but there is nothing in writing. Discussion about China began at San Benigno and then spread to Foglizzo through Fr Conelli, who seemed destined by Don Bosco to head up the expedition.<sup>6</sup> I was mentioned in the note about who would have accompanied him. Don Bosco knew about it. But none of those who were considered at the time actually went there."<sup>7</sup>

Fr Lodovico Costa (1871–1944), who was a novice at Foglizzo 1887–1888, a year before Bishop Versiglia, and who was always in contact with Fr Arturo Conelli, his philosophy teacher that year, wrote on 31 January 1941:

"For many years it had been known how earnestly Don Bosco dreamed of and prepared for the work of his sons in China. From 1886<sup>8</sup> there was much talk about it in the Congregation, especially among the novices at Foglizzo. Fr Arturo Conelli, the philosophy teacher, taking advantage of his long chats with Don Bosco, relayed news to them of the mysterious lands, the "dreams" with which Don Bosco had foreseen the welcome that would be given to the first missionaries, development of the work, the customs and wonders of those vast regions.

"The general opinion was that Fr Conelli would have been considered as the leader of the first expedition. And when Don Bosco had seen two large chalices in a dream lifting up to heaven, one filled with the sweat the other with the blood of Salesians, everyone said that Fr Conelli would be the first martyr in the Chinese Mission; many of the clerics aspired to being able to follow him in that fate."<sup>9</sup>

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5 Fr Eugenio Ceria (1870–1957) made his novitiate at San Benigno Canavese in the 1885–86 school year, and remained there as a professed Salesian the following year. On 14 September 1886, the clerical novices were transferred to the new house at Foglizzo. Amongst them were Andrea Beltrami and Lodovico Olive. This latter would be one of Fr Versiglia's mission companions.

6 Fr Arturo Conelli (1864–1924) entered the Valdocco Oratory in 1877 when he was thirteen years old. He donned the clerical habit in 1881 and promised Don Bosco he would remain with him for the rest of his life. He taught philosophy to the clerics first at San Benigno and then at Foglizzo. As pupils here he had cleric Andrea Beltrami (1886–87) and then cleric Luigi Versiglia (1888–89). After having gained his degree at the Gregorian in Rome, this latter took his place in 1893, teaching philosophy to the clerics, while Fr Conelli took up the role of Rector at the Leonine Institute at Orvieto (1893–98) and then at the Villa Sora College at Frascati (1898–1902). In 1902 Fr Conelli was elected Provincial of the Salesian Houses in Lazio, Umbria and the Marches. In 1917, the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr Albera, called him to be a member of the Salesian Superior Chapter, First as Prefect General of Studies (1917–19) and then as Economist General (1919–24).

7 *Memorie di Don Eugenio Ceria*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

8 This was the year of the Barcelona missionary dream.

9 *Memorie di Don Lodovico Costa*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

Fr Paolo Pastorino, a student at the Salesian Institute at Sampierdarena from 1890–94 and a novice at Foglizzo in 1894–95, where he had Fr Versiglia as assistant and teacher, wrote on 14 April 1930 from Cavaglià, where he was the Rector of the Salesian Institute:

“I can assure you that at Sampierdarena during the years 1890–94, given that the catechist was the late-lamented Fr Angelo Festa, he had spread the news amongst us boys that Fr Conelli had been designated by Don Bosco to open the China Mission and to be the first Salesian Bishop; and I can assure you that Fr Festa spoke of the subsequent martyrdom, although what remained most clearly in my mind was the statement that the first Salesian missionary in China would become a bishop. These allusions to China remained so alive for me that every time I saw Fr Conelli, it renewed this memory for me.

“Fr Festa was a very worthy man of faith, most affectionate toward Don Bosco, and had also been his secretary ...

“When Fr Conelli did not go to China, those by then distant revelations faded somewhat for me; but they were reawakened at the announcement of the massacre of our two heroes.”<sup>10</sup>

A fellow novice of Bishop Versiglia’s, whose memoirs we frequently turn to, Fr Emanuele Manassero, notes: “I recall that during recreation, and sometimes also when explaining the Sunday Gospel, Fr Conelli recounted some of Don Bosco’s dreams and indicated in particular the vision of the two chalices, one filled with Salesian sweat and the other with blood, and it made a deep impression on us.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Don Bosco and China**

Even before sending his missionaries to America, Don Bosco had thought keenly about the mission in the Celestial Empire, as China was then called.

Already in 1873, negotiations had begun to found a school of arts and trades in Hong Kong and Don Bosco had spoken with Pope Pius IX about it during an audience on 5 January 1874.<sup>12</sup>

It was the Pope himself who encouraged him to think of the Orient. In an audience granted him on 15 April 1876, Holy Saturday, he put to him the need for missionaries in Australia, India, China and Japan and asked him if he could accept one or more missions in these countries.<sup>13</sup>

In another audience on 3 May of the same year, Pius IX suggested three Vicariate Apostolics to him, one in India, one in China and one in Australia.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of properly prepared personnel did not allow Don Bosco to accept the Pope’s proposals, but the desire regarding the Orient remained keenly alive in his heart and showed up in various hints in his missionary dreams.

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10 *Memorie di Don Paolo Pastorino*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

11 *Memorie di Don Emanuele Manassero*, pp. 6–7, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

12 E. Ceria, *Epistolario di San Giovanni Bosco*, II (1956), pp. 330 & 370.

13 E. Ceria, *Epistolario di San Giovanni Bosco*, III (1958), p. 42; MB, XII, p. 177.

14 E. Ceria, *Epistolario di San Giovanni Bosco*, III (1958), pp. 52 & 128; MB, XII, p. 194.

During the Saint's beatification process, Fr Francesco Dalmazzo testified: "I myself heard Don Bosco exclaim many times: "I already see the Salesians in Africa and Asia, and entering China ... They will have a house right in Peking."<sup>15</sup>

The words Don Bosco wrote in his testament to his sons in 1884 are memorable ones:

"Time will lead us to establish our missions in China and precisely in Peking [Beijing]. But let us never forget that we exist for poor and abandoned boys. Amongst those who know little or nothing of the true God you will see taking place wonders formerly thought incredible but which almighty God will make manifest to the world."<sup>16</sup>

### **Don Bosco's missionary dreams**

The Lord chose to guide Don Bosco from the age of nine, with dreams indicating in a mysterious way what his future and the future of the Congregation would be.

Historian of the Congregation, Fr Eugenio Ceria, brought together five of the missionary dreams in the first volume of the *Annali*. They had already been recounted in the *Biographical Memoirs of St John Bosco*. Mentions of China can be found in the dream of 2 July 1885 and the Barcelona dream in 1886.

In the dream on 2 July 1885, Don Bosco seemed to find himself before a very high mountain, on whose peak stood an angel so radiantly lit up that even the most remote areas were illuminated. The angel said to Don Bosco: "The angel of Arphaxad is calling you to fight the Lord's battles and gather the people's in the Lord's granaries."

Then other visions appeared which led Don Bosco to various regions of America, Africa, Asia, Australia. Don Bosco saw the immense good that the Salesians would achieve throughout the world in a hundred and fifty or two hundred years if they remained faithful to the original Salesian spirit.

Don Bosco himself researched which peoples corresponded to the angel of Arphaxad, who appears in the tenth chapter of Genesis, and was convinced that it represented China. He said that it would not be long before the Salesians would be called to go there.<sup>17</sup>

In the Barcelona dream which took place on 9 July 1886, Don Bosco found himself among a large crowd of youngsters who were crying out to him: "We have been waiting a long time for you!" ... Then the Shepherdess of his early dreams appeared, inviting Don Bosco and the youngsters to look far ahead and read (among an immense expanse of mountains, oceans and hills), the names of Valparaiso, Santiago, Peking; and to draw a line between Santiago and Peking. Any number of centres of Salesian life would develop along this imagined axis.

In an explanation given to Fr Lemoyne, Don Bosco spoke of Salesians who found themselves on the opposite banks of the river that ran in the vicinity of Peking: "Some will come from the left bank", he said, "from the north"; "the others from the right bank, from the south; they will meet and shake hands ..." "But the time" he concluded "is in God's hands."<sup>18</sup>

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15 MB, XI, pp. 409–410

16 MB XVII, 273

17 *Annali*, I, 551–555; MB, XVII, 643–647.

18 *Annali*, I, 556–558; MB, XVIII, 72–74.

In a discussion he had with Fr Arturo Conelli at San Benigno in October 1886, Don Bosco spoke of the good the Salesians would do in China in one city, Peking, near the river which provides its water, and at a bridge. Then, indicating the bridge, Don Bosco said: “Here Don Bosco will meet the missionaries.”<sup>19</sup>

On 8 January 1888, just 22 days before he died, Don Bosco spoke about the missions in China once more to the Duke Norfolk, who had come to see him and was kneeling beside his sickbed.<sup>20</sup>

### **The one who was destined to begin the missions in China**

Young Luigi Versiglia, whom Providence had destined to begin realising Don Bosco’s dreams about China, found himself at the Oratory in Valdocco from September 1885.

He had come to the Oratory on condition that he did not become a priest. But Providence, making use of the setting which was steeped in the fervent spirit of piety and the missionary spirit, as well as its attraction to the great educator of youth, increased his understanding and led his generous heart and iron will toward the grand missionary ideal. “By living in close contact with Don Bosco,” his mother attests “Luigi became enthusiastic about Salesian life and decided to become a Salesian.”<sup>21</sup>

One of Versiglia’s companions, who then became an outstanding Salesian and capable writer, when asked to write down what he recalled of him, wrote just a few lines: “At the Oratory they used say that Our Lady took on the task of sending Don Bosco pupils who were able to become good Salesians. Versiglia had to have been one of these chosen ones.”<sup>22</sup> He could not have hit the mark any more precisely.

The young Versiglia saw Don Bosco very often: he was among the group of boys who, when Don Bosco appeared on the balcony outside his room, stopped their game to applaud him and enjoy his smile; he saw him crossing the courtyard, heard him often in church and at the goodnight; he also heard him whisper in his ear: “Come and see me: I have something to tell you.” But he was never able to go to Don Bosco.

His decisive meeting with Don Bosco took place far more intimately when the latter was already in heaven. From that day his life became a total aspiration to acquire the necessary virtues – they are his own words – for becoming a good missionary and saving many souls.

This call to a glorious death meant that his life became a continuous upward journey of self-sacrifice, first of all before becoming a missionary, then saving souls, and finally by giving his own life.

Martyrdom is a gift of the Spirit, a seed sown that develops and grows to maturity throughout life. It is not a sudden flash in a grey sky, but the culminating point of an entirely luminous day, characterised by a continuous crescendo of light which finally becomes the splendour of martyrdom. It is an enduring life witness, to the point of the supreme witness of one’s own life.

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19 *Annali*, III, 597.

20 MB, XVIII, 513

21 *Summ.* p. 278.

22 *Memorie di Don Giuseppe Bisto* Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

News he provided to others will allow us to follow Bishop Versiglia's work; letters to his spiritual directors, Fr Eugenio Bianchi and Fr Giulio Barberis, and then to Fr Paul Albera, Fr Philip Rinaldi, other Salesians and the Carmelite Sisters in Florence, will reveal the inner journey of his soul to the heights of sanctity.

### **His companion in martyrdom, Fr Caravario**

Fr Callisto Caravario's life is a much briefer one, 27 years, and a simpler one: the constant, direct progress of a soul which, from early childhood, aimed at a luminous goal, and was pursued with growing enthusiasm and at the cost of any sacrifice: priesthood and the missions.

He too wrote considerably. Letters to his mother, to Superiors, his friends and young students will allow us to gradually follow the inner light which grew to become the splendour of martyrdom which he desired and accepted as God's most precious gift.

## FROM NATIVE VILLAGE TO VALDOCCO

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Three years with Don Bosco

1885–1888

### His mother's recollections<sup>1</sup>

Luigi Versiglia, his parents being Giovanni and Maria Giorgi, was born at Oliva Gessi, in the diocese of Tortona and province of Pavia, on 5 June 1873. He was the only male child. He had two sisters.

“The family was admired as one of the best in the district for their spirit of faith and exemplary conduct,” says a missionary Salesian who knew them.<sup>2</sup>

“Luigi had a great sense of devotion,” his mother asserted. “He loved church. Very early in the piece he learned to serve Mass. When he was very small he was unable to place the missal on the altar. He had a lively character, was open-minded and intelligent, and had a bent for arithmetic.”<sup>3</sup>

Even in his three years of junior secondary school at the Oratory in Valdocco, he gained eight at the end of the first and third years, and ten at the end of the second. In China he was the architect for practically all the buildings in the Mission.

“A good priest who was teacher of maths and science in the classes at Pavia” his mother continued “had come to know little Luigi and wanted to work with him himself, promising him he would guide him as far as university. Luigi felt more inclined toward veterinary science. He was passionate about horses and often road bare-back on a difficult steed which a colonel used keep in a stable near our home.”<sup>4</sup>

Later he made good use of this passion of his. At Genzano, in the years immediately preceding his departure for China, he used to go horse riding. In the Mission he was able to make competent and safe use of this means to go and visit Christians living far away.

### You will be a priest

His mother continued: “The people, seeing how pious and devout he was, despite his liveliness, would tell him: ‘One day you will be a priest!’ But he would protest energetically; and to cut this

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<sup>1</sup> In March 1930, Fr Carlo Braga went to Oliva Gessi to pass on the news of the death of Bishop Versiglia to his elderly mother, his sister Celestina and other relatives. One evening, his mother told him what she recalled of Luigi's early years. These recollections of his mother are referred to in the proceedings of the beatification process which we indicate with the title of *Summarium*.

<sup>2</sup> *Testimonianza di Don Mario Calvi, Summ.* p. 278.

<sup>3</sup> *Summ.* p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> *Summ.* p. 147.

kind of gossip short he was even, for a while, less involved in serving at the altar. Then fearing that the good priest (his teacher) wanted to take him under his wing with a view to quietly direct him toward clerical studies, he refused point blank to follow him to Pavia.

“When there was discussion about sending him to the Salesian Oratory in Turin while Don Bosco was still alive, he willingly agreed to go there, because he was told that they did not become priests there and that he could later attend the well-known veterinary school in Turin.

“Initially, when he entered the college, he found it difficult to adapt to the regular life and to apply himself, and he wrote on several occasions to his parents saying that he had decided to leave the Salesian house. His poor father, who was busy with work, went to see him only after he had insisted on several occasions. But when he got to Valdocco, Luigi had changed his opinion and said he was happy to continue his studies at the Oratory.

“For two years, when he came home for summer holidays, the coachman who brought him home from the station, would stir him up with the usual line: “You are going to be a priest!” Luigi did not like this at all, and one time he got down from the coach and walked home, to avoid this sort of talk.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus far is what his mother said.

Bishop Versiglia himself confirmed this fact that he had no intention of becoming priest, telling Fr Braga about it and adding that he had refused an invitation to go to the Seminary in Pavia.<sup>6</sup>

Luigi entered the Oratory at Valdocco on 17 September 1885 and spent the next three years there in the junior secondary school until 16 August 1888.<sup>7</sup>

We have valuable accounts of these three years by three of his school friends who then became outstanding figures in the Salesian Congregation: Bishop Federico Emanuel, Fr Emanuele Manassero, and Fr Giovanni Ségala.<sup>8</sup>

## **A model student**

Fr Ségala offers a fine sketch of Luigi Versiglia the student.

“Right from his first arrival at the Oratory (17 September 1885), Luigi Versiglia showed himself to be of a sensible nature, with mature balance beyond his age, in demeanour and in speech; he was always exemplary in conduct and applied himself regularly to his duties as a student. These gifts were much appreciated by his fellow students and made even more valuable by his gentle language, friendly approach, and his ever calm and jovial outlook. He was of a naturally obliging disposition, available to everyone whenever the opportunity and possibility presented themselves. These fine qualities were ones he not only maintained constantly, but he perfected them as he advanced in age and over the years at school.

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<sup>5</sup> *Summ.* p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> *Summ.* p. 258.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Documenti scolastici*, in Arch. Sal. 9, I, Vers.

<sup>8</sup> All three were classmates of Bishop Versiglia in the first three years of secondary school at the Oratory. Emanuel Federico (1872–1962) was the Rector at Caserta, Bari, Borgo San Martino and then, in 1929, suburbicarian Bishop of Sabina and Poggio Mirteto, alongside Cardinal Sbarretti. In 1937 he was promoted to the See of Castellamare di Stabia. Emanuele Manassero (1873–1946) was Rector at Foglizzo, then Provincial in Poland, Austria, Piedmont (Subalpina) and the United States. Giovanni Ségala (1871–1959) was Rector in a number of houses in Piedmont, Provincial in Sicily and then Vicar of the Rector Major for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

In his first year at school (1885-86) he was among the quite average students, or just a little better. But in the second year (1886-87) we became aware that this was really the result of a poor grasp of the basics in the elementary classes and his less mature age, since at the beginning of this year, in the so-called preliminary tests for places in class, he was immediately among the first, to no little amazement of his classmates and the teacher as well. When the latter passed on the results, he seemed somewhat distrustful and was not exactly encouraging in his words or in the belief that this rank would be maintained. Instead, Versiglia kept a place of honour throughout the entire year, on a par with the best in the class and at the end of the year was judged worthy of second prize.

When asked in confidence how he could explain this sudden and important progress, he replied with humble frankness that during the autumn holidays he had set about a thorough revision of grammar and had done written exercises.”

### **With a difficult teacher**

“In the third year of secondary the students had to put up with some unpleasant setbacks due to the literature teacher” Fr Ségala went on to say. “He was a young cleric, learned and pious, but he did not have the gift of understanding the Salesian education system. He had a constantly quirky nature and made school difficult with frequent and lengthy harangues either to the whole class or to particular individuals ...

“As well as this he upset the students by being over-strict in marking homework and lessons. They could count on getting one or two points less than the criteria used by other teachers in earlier years. The consequences were: embitterment, discouragement and some resistance and insubordination.

“Young Luigi Versiglia took no part in anything like personal resentment, or at least had the virtue to hide it and keep it under wraps, earning the admiration of his classmates and the respect and benevolence of the teacher. However, he had to put up with the common lot of seeing his marks for homework and classwork go down.”<sup>9</sup>

His best report card is the one at the end of the second year: three 8s, four 9s and three 10s.<sup>10</sup>

### **Someone who stood out from the ordinary**

Bishop Emanuel offers us in particular the moral and physical figure of Luigi Versiglia. This corresponds pretty much with what his family and close friends offer us, and Fr Manassero’s detailed account, but we will leave this aside in the interests of brevity for now, drawing on it later in other circumstances.

“There were about 600 of us students”, writes Bishop Emanuel “from different cities and towns some close, some far away, but all joined in affection for Don Bosco and the bonds of religion and charity.

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<sup>9</sup> *Memorie di Don Giovanni Ségala*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Documenti scolastici*, Arch. Sal. 9, 1, Vers.



“Two large clubs stood out in the whole group: the altar boys, made up of the best behaved, and which Versiglia and others belonged to, including Fr Orione; and then there was the singing group, a little more mischievous, and I belonged to that group.

“Among the altar boys, Versiglia was one of those who stood out from the ordinary. He was rather tall, muscular and almost aristocratic of bearing, which gave him some ascendancy over his companions, though he was cheerful and friendly towards them.

“He joined in keenly with the games and liked to win, though without causing problems. His recreation time was really happy, just as Don Bosco wanted; but once the game was over he would run up to the teacher or Fr Trione to listen to something that was always helpful and nice.”

### **Intelligence and resolve**

“Through his outward gifts, which he showed in recreation, such as promptness and agility, dexterity and tenacity, it was easy also to glimpse his keen intelligence and resolute will. These became evident in the classroom.

“It was his resolute will that kept his body on task during lessons, ensured precise responses to questioning, meant that his lessons were well attended to and work done with the greatest diligence and all this brought him success amongst the first in the class. In fact he was always the ‘decurion’ or class leader, a role assigned to those who were first in class.

“He did well in all subjects but his preference was for maths, because he was reflective and tenacious. At the end of each school year he always won a medal or at least an honourable mention.

“Over the three years of college life he never, as I recall, received punishment or was marked down less than ten for poor behaviour, something which stood out among his 600 schoolmates: indeed he was at the forefront of all the good and holy initiatives among the pupils.”

### **Like an angel at prayer in church**

“He shone out for his piety. In church he was like an angel at prayer: recollected, fervent and regular with daily Communion. He was like a heavenly creature at all the solemn religious functions of the altar boys society. His favourite devotions were those to do with the Blessed Sacrament and Mary Help of Christians.

“From just a few indications it was easy to gather that his moral stature was that of a young man who, without having exceptional gifts, was exemplary in all his behaviour; truly a model pupil: pious, studious, disciplined at school, warm toward his schoolmates, and above all affectionate toward his Superiors, especially Fr Trione, who was very fond of him. After his third year of secondary, it was he who advised him to go to the novitiate.

“That year, 1887–88, we were all part of the concern at Don Bosco’s illness, his eventual passing, and the funeral rites, especially when his body lay in state for three days in the small

church of St Francis, so it could be venerated by all of Turin, and then when it was accompanied to the grave at Valsalice.”<sup>11</sup>

### **“Come and see me; I have something to tell you”**

His mother’s account continues, providing us with a valuable piece of information:

“On the occasion of Don Bosco’s Name Day, Luigi was chosen to read out a compliment. When he had finished reading, he went to kiss the hand of the Father of orphans.

‘Come and see me,’ Don Bosco said to him, ‘I have something to tell you.’

“But, for reasons we do not know, Luigi did not go to listen to what Don Bosco wanted to tell him.”<sup>12</sup>

Don Bosco’s Name Day used be celebrated on 24 June and was the most heartfelt of the family celebrations. On the evening before there was always an academy, at which every class offered something to Don Bosco through its representative.

In 1887, Don Bosco’s health had rapidly declined. Add to that the trip to Rome for the consecration of the Sacred Heart Church; it was an occasion of much joy and spiritual consolation for Don Bosco, but also wore him out physically. He returned to Turin on 22 May, but was exhausted. Some days of early heat had also exhausted him even more. On 4 June he allowed himself to be taken to Valsalice where the climate was not so heavy.

### **Don Bosco’s final Name Day**

He was brought back to Valdocco in the evening of 23 June for the academy. It was his last.<sup>13</sup> Versiglia was chosen from the second year class to read the address, customarily prepared by the pupil himself then reviewed by the teacher. Fr Antonio Rebagliati, Versiglia’s teacher in his first and second years of secondary, would assign the theme of gratitude to Don Bosco to the whole class: The pupil who had done the best work on it was chosen as class representative.

Don Bosco’s few words would certainly have made an impression on Versiglia’s mind. He did not go to see Don Bosco because he would not have been able to do so any longer.

Don Bosco no longer came down into the courtyard. Two days a week, pupils from the fourth and fifth years could go up to Don Bosco’s room for confession. Don Bosco maintained this custom until he was forced to remain in bed, that is, toward halfway through December 1887.<sup>14</sup> But Versiglia was not a member of those classes. Besides, even these lucky ones, following Don Bosco’s last Name Day had little opportunity to avail themselves of this privilege, because he was almost always absent from the Oratory.

On 4 July 1887, he was taken to Lanzo, where he remained until 19 August. From there he was then accompanied directly to Valsalice, where he was to give the retreat to the aspirants and then the

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11 *Memorie di Mons. Federico Emanuel*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers. Don Bosco’s mortal remains were interred Valsalice from 4 February 1888 until 9 June 1929.

12 *Summ.*, p. 148.

13 Described in the *Boll. Sal.*, August 1887, p. 89.

14 MB, XVIII, p. 457.

confreres. But rarely did his state of health allow him to speak with them. Only on 2 October did he come back down to Valdocco, still suffering, and always affectionately assisted by those closest to him, and they were very diligent in forestalling any occasion which might tire him.

So it can be fully explained why young Versiglia did not have the possibility of approaching Don Bosco, neither during that part of the second year school year which ended on 16 August, nor when he came back to the Oratory to begin Third Year on 15 October 1887.

### **Don Bosco speaks to him from Paradise**

But Don Bosco spoke to young Luigi very clearly from Paradise, right in that church where he had seen and listened to him so many times when he was alive.

Luigi's mother concludes her account with this information: "During his Third Year his vocation was decided upon and it was to stay with Don Bosco."<sup>15</sup>

In fact, at the end of Third Year, on 15 August 1888, Luigi was at Valsalice for the retreat for novices, preached by his future spiritual director Fr Giulio Barberis, and then he went for the holidays to Lanzo, along with the other novices and clerical students of philosophy, amongst whom was the cleric Andrew Beltrami.

A confidence shared by Versiglia with his close friend Manassero, reveals the moment at which, touched by grace, Luigi felt Don Bosco's call and said his 'yes'.

"The Catechist, Fr Stefano Trione," Fr Manassero writes "used to circulate among the best students brief works by St Thomas and St Alphonsus regarding vocation. Sometimes I exchanged some of these with Versiglia, wrapped up in such a way that outsiders would not notice. But we never spoke about such a topic. Later at Foglizzo and then in Rome, he confided to me that at first he was dreaming about arms and horses. Then, when he took part in the farewell to a group of missionaries in the Church of Mary Help of Christians, he had been struck very much by the recollected and unpretentious demeanour of one young man among them on the sanctuary. His vocation began from there."<sup>16</sup>

### **Being a Salesian so as to be a missionary**

A very valuable letter which Versiglia wrote two years later to his Rector at Valsalice, Fr Giulio Barberis, provides the details of the circumstances of his call, revealing the intimate sentiments in his soul.

22 July 1890

"My dear Fr Rector,

"I have already manifested by spoken word and also in writing my desire for the missions. And now, as advised by you, I am clearly expressing what I feel within me.

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<sup>15</sup> *Summ.* p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> *Memorie di Don Emanuele Manassero*, p. 3; Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

“Above all I am telling you that the desire for the missions was the allurements which the Lord used to draw me to himself; it was precisely in '88 when I was still in Third Year at the Oratory, that at the departure of the expedition led by Fr Cassini, I was aided and indeed really struck by the Lord's grace. I abandoned any prior ideas I had, in order to become a Salesian, with the hope of becoming a missionary.

“But then this desire disappeared out of the hope, indeed the presumption, of going ahead with my studies and also doing something good here in Italy; even more so, knowing the life of sacrifice that the missionary must make, I did not feel so ready for this sacrifice.

“But when I came here to Valsalice from Foglizzo, the example of the confreres gave me new heart; and especially when Fr Rua, in the academy for the Immaculate, spoke of Africa and other places, it re-ignited even more the desire to go to Africa. For some time this desire preoccupied me so much that it besieged me in church, at school, at recreation and also when I went to bed.

“But I was often aware that these urgings were mixed up with self-love. I was aware that I wanted the salvation of souls, but this flowed out of love of self. I did not have the resolve to work and suffer for Jesus Christ alone.

“Then, almost discouraged, there were many times when I offered my life to the Lord, especially before our Father's tomb, even if I could help in some way those who were to go to Africa, or through the immediate sacrifice of my life, or even by remaining hidden for the rest of my life in some workshop or in some other humble role which the Lord might entrust to me.

“Now I no longer feel those raptures I felt then; yet the desire still continues; indeed it seems to me to be even steadier, because when I think about it, it no longer stirs my soul poetically, but when my mind quickly thinks of the sacrifices one must make there, rather do I feel urged to make some effort to acquire some virtues, not allow myself to be laid low by tiredness or boredom at work or in recreation.”<sup>17</sup>

The letter reveals the origin and defines the nature of Versiglia's vocation: with Don Bosco, for the missions; the Salesian vocation as a missionary vocation.

### **A generous heart and a will of iron**

In the final part of the letter, Versiglia speaks of the obstacles to his vocation: external obstacle like his affection for his family.

“But the real obstacles are those I have within me,” he writes; and he specifies which virtues were lacking in him to be a good Salesian missionary. From this confession and other more intimate ones which he provided in writing to Fr Barberis, we can argue that virtue was not something little Luigi was born with, nor did it grow spontaneously in him. It was the tough, fierce conquest of a generous heart and an iron will.

Don Bosco understood that this young man who kissed his hand was “capable of becoming a good Salesian,” and not being able to tell him that while he was alive, and told him so from Paradise during that farewell function for departing missionaries. That day, for young Versiglia,

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<sup>17</sup> *Lettere a Don Giulio Barberis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

marks the beginning of an upward journey that would have its culmination in the thirst for martyrdom and in heroic acceptance.

The indication in Versiglia's letter to the missionary, Fr Cassini, allows us to also be clear about the day on which the young Third Year student felt, decisively, Don Bosco's call.

Fr Valentino Cassini had been one of the first ten Salesians who, in November 1875, had left for Argentina. On 4 December 1887, he had returned to Turin along with Bishop Cagliero, in order to be present for the by now proximate death of Don Bosco. Fr Cassini then left once more as the leader of a group of six missionaries. The farewell function was held in the Church of Mary Help of Christians on Sunday 11 March 1888. The young man who had made such an impression on Versiglia with his demeanour was one of those six. Here was the beginning of his call.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Boll. Sal.* April 1888, p. 37; *Annali*, II, 20.

## TWO YEARS OF SALESIAN FORMATION

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Foglizzo and Valsalice

1888–1890

### A model novice

When the summer holidays were over at Lanzo, Versiglia went with the other *ascritti* or candidates to Foglizzo for the novitiate. The Rector and novice master was Fr Eugenio Bianchi, an outstanding formator of souls, whom many Salesians remember with much gratitude.

The cassock was blessed and given to the novices by Fr Michael Rua, first successor of Don Bosco, on 21 October 1888. It was the first clothing ceremony performed by Fr Rua. In previous years Don Bosco had always reserved this ceremony to himself, even in the final year when his health was very poor.

“Of all the novices,” a fellow novice writes “two stood out for all those intellectual and moral gifts that come to the attention of even the most inattentive: they were Emanuele Manassero and Luigi Versiglia. They were ahead of all the others in intelligence and virtue.”<sup>1</sup>

“I recall with great pleasure,” writes another “the irreproachable conduct of my novitiate companion Versiglia in everything: charitable in putting up with the faults of companions and highlighting instead their virtues, gentle and kind in dealing with people, along with such friendliness that it won everyone’s sympathy. His constant smile manifested the candour of his soul, nourished by piety and a scrupulous observance of the rules. The attitude he adopted in chapel was admirable. I looked upon him almost with envy, in the desire to succeed in imitating him.”<sup>2</sup>

“I admired the pious youth in him,” a third writes “and at the same time how he was alert, enterprising, active and full of life. He rightly earned the respect of Superiors and companions.

“He came first in class and was the leader of the study group for philosophy. I recall that in recreation, more often than not he went to walk with Fr Conelli, who at the time was the Prefect of

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<sup>1</sup> *Memorie di Don Giuseppe Guala*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>2</sup> *Memorie di Don Gaetano Boschi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

Studies and philosophy teacher. The word was that they often spoke of the missions and in particular of the mission to China, foreseen in a dream by Don Bosco.”<sup>3</sup>

During the Holy Week ceremonies, it was the custom, especially in religious communities, to highlight the *Mandatum*, or the washing of the feet. Versiglia was chosen to represent St Paul, probably because he showed special apostolic and missionary zeal.<sup>4</sup>

### **A sketch drawn up by a bishop companion**

But the most complete and penetrating profile is the one already quoted from by his Oratory companion, Bishop Federico Emanuel.

“During the novitiate” he writes “young Versiglia was substantially what he had been at the Valdocco Oratory: serious, cheerful and sociable during recreation and exemplary in all his behaviour.

“With age, natural and spiritual gifts also developed in him. Physically he became stronger and more exuberant. He understood that he had to struggle, to overcome and dominate his nature; this also became apparent at recreation with his companions.

“His intelligence, memory and will, meant he was among the first in class. In church he kept still, and absorbed in meditation and prayer in a very edifying way. During religious ceremonies, in prayer groups, academies, he always played a leading role. To sum up, while not having exceptional gifts, he always edified the others for his nobility of bearing, his cheerful recreations, sometimes very lively, and in his filial relationships with the Superiors.

“I do not recall him ever being called to book for anything. The understanding was that when the novitiate year was over, he was immediately admitted to profession, which he made at Valsalice, near Don Bosco’s tomb.”

### **Student at Valsalice**

The novices came to Valsalice at the beginning of October 1889 for the retreat and for their religious profession, which took place on 11 October. Cleric Versiglia did his Fifth Year of High School at Valsalice.

Bishop Emanuel’s report continues thus:

“With profession, he felt he was the spiritual son of the Don Bosco he had so often approached at the Oratory. That glorious tomb was for him an altar that spoke to him and urged him to continue to make progress in the ways of perfection.

“I do not believe he used corporal penances or had recourse to exceptional practices in his exercise of religious life. He was always simply the model cleric; but those who knew his strong temperament and the exuberance of his feelings and strong passions which disturbed his soul, could well understand the effort and mortification and violence involved to remain constantly calm,

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<sup>3</sup> *Memorie di Don Giacomo Angeleri*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Memorie di Don Emanuele Manassero*, pp. 6–7, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

friendly toward his companions, humble and obedient with all the Superiors, and exact in his observance of the Rule.

“The progress he made in piety and in learning meant that he was chosen from among a hundred others to go to the Gregorian University in Rome.”<sup>5</sup>

### **“Desire for the missions has been growing”**

It was at the end of this school year and more precisely on 22 July 1890, that he wrote the letter to his Rector, Fr Barberis, in which he traced the history of his missionary vocation and which we quoted earlier.

“The desire for the missions has been growing ever more” he wrote in another letter to Fr Barberis the same month, “but especially this year. However I fear that mine may be a vain desire, due to my lack of virtue, lack of love for mortification and suffering.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, in a letter a few days later, on 26 July 1890, once more to Fr Barberis, he formulated specific resolutions to prepare himself better for the missions through personal sanctification, mortification where self-love was concerned, and humility.<sup>7</sup>

This ideal and these resolutions can be found in almost all the letters he wrote in the years that followed to his two spiritual directors, Fr Bianchi and Fr Barberis.

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<sup>5</sup> *Memorie di Mons. Federico Emanuel*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>6</sup> *Lettere a Don Giulio Barberis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>7</sup> *Lettere a Don Giulio Barberis*, Arch. Sal., 9, 2, Vers.



## AT THE GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY IN ROME

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1890–1893

### A mark of respect

When he had completed his Fifth Year of High School at Valsalice and succeeded brilliantly in gaining his ‘licence’ in the public school examinations (July 1890), cleric Versiglia was chosen to attend the philosophy course at the Gregorian University in Rome, together with Alessio Barberis and Luigi Giuganino.

“This choice was a mark of his Superiors’ respect. For his companions who remained at Valsalice for their philosophy course, it was cause for pride that three poor young Salesians would be attending the Gregorian University alongside older companions who had had a longer preparation. They honoured them and spoke of them with admiration and real pleasure.” Thus wrote one of those who remained at Valsalice.<sup>1</sup>

### A quite diverse trio

Cleric Versiglia arrived in Rome on 11 October 1890. The unforgettable Fr Alessio Barberis has left us a lively and warm sketch of the three years at the Gregorian.<sup>2</sup>

“I found myself in the company of cleric Versiglia in Rome during the three-year philosophy course at the Gregorian University. I will tell you the little I knew of him and that memory has allowed me to preserve.

“*His physical aspect.* Nothing special outwardly. A healthy and robust constitution meant no special consideration, while not overlooking suggestions of common prudence.

“He bore a scar on his forehead, the result of an operation he underwent in those years to remove a growth that was threatening to grow and permanently disfigure his appearance.

“*His personal bearing* was resolute and military-like, but always friendly and gentlemanly. He had a firm and steady gaze, which impressed; it was easy for him to command discipline, even with a large assembly of very lively youngsters whom he could control with a simple glance.

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<sup>1</sup> *Memorie di Don Amilcare Bertolucci*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>2</sup> Fr Alessio Barberis (1875–1942), founder and first Rector of the International Theological Institute at Foglizzo, then transferred to Crocetta, Turin. He taught here for the rest of his life, except from 1913–22, when he was the admired and beloved Rector of the *Collegio San Giovanni Evangelista* ( St John Evangelist College) in Turin. In the last year of his rectorship at San Giovanni (1921–22) he had cleric Caravario with him as assistant.

“*Moral stature.* sociable, cheerful in the daily round, he was busy as were all the students at the Gregorian, with the various tasks proper to the festive oratory and also *teatrino*. Those were heroic days! He would shift enthusiastically from St Thomas ‘Summa’ to Molière and Goldoni! Above all he enjoyed the lighter and more playful side.

“Versiglia played Emanuele in ‘*Colpa e perdono*’, the Tribune Valente in ‘*Pistrine*’: he preferred the proud, chivalrous roles. A little bit of everything, but he was always self-assured, with his habitual seriousness, and this allowed him to dedicate himself sometimes to tragedy, then comedy, according to need.

“After being in the courtyard all of Sunday with the boys at the Oratory, and then after playing our part on stage with honour, we went to classes somewhat tired, but always gladly. There were three of us confreres in the course: Luigi Giuganino, myself and Versiglia. Giuganino was the perfect mathematician: numbers, geometric drawings, problems, equations: completely at ease the more complicated the formulas and steps required were. He was as young as I was and as distracted too. One on the right, the other on the left, Versiglia between us representing moderation, calm, common sense and the most profound notion of Salesian religious life.

“So a very different trio, each day, sunshine or rain, we spent two hours walking through the streets of Rome, discussing a hundred topics. Versiglia was our mentor due to age, good judgement and better formed character; he functioned almost as an assistant for us. And we happily let ourselves be assisted and grew in knowledge and virtue, supported by the good example and, if needed, his words.

“*His charity.* I particularly recall his affectionate and fraternal care in my regard when, during my third year of philosophy, a strong bout of pneumonia brought me to the brink.

“The Lord did not find me sufficiently prepared; and 45 years later I am still wandering this poor world.<sup>3</sup> Versiglia stayed with me day and night through to the moment of crisis from which I emerged exhausted but cured!

“I can see him there beside the bed, concerned and good; at first anxious and then glad that he had helped me regain my health, God’s best gift after Grace. I have never forgotten how much Versiglia did for me in those tough circumstances: I am eternally grateful to him.

“When I read the account of his martyrdom, occasioned by his defence of those three poor women, the fact seemed to me, as we used say, completely in character. If it were just himself he would have put up with any pain or affront; but in his presence, no weak individual would have ever suffered violent injustice with impunity!

“When I returned to Rome for my four years of theology, I no longer found cleric Versiglia there, since he had been entrusted with various duties by the Superiors. While I peacefully attended to theological arguments, he was out there at work, accelerating his progress towards positions of responsibility and honour that were rightly assigned to him.

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<sup>3</sup> Fr Alessio wrote this from Turin, Crocetta on 5 May 1940. His illness goes back to the school year 1892–93, when exactly 47 years old, which he rounds off to 45.

“I almost lost sight of him then, since our paths took different directions, despite being united in dear and unforgettable memories. In time I knelt before him,<sup>4</sup> to kiss his episcopal ring; and he embraced me, just as he did when he supported me when I was ill.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Among the boys at the festive Oratory**

A brief report by Fr Carlo Catanzariti concerns especially the apostolic zeal and brilliant success of cleric Versiglia among the boys at the festive Oratory attached to the Sacred Heart Hospice in Rome.

“I first had him as a companion at the Oratory in Turin, in the years 1885–87” he writes. “I was doing Third and Fourth Year High School and he the First and Second. He passed for a very good and studious boy, rather serious in character and somewhat reserved, though considerate and friendly with everyone. Later, I went to the novitiate at Foglizzo and lost sight of him.

“We met once again in Rome at the Sacred Heart Hospice, I as a teacher, he as a student at the Gregorian. Over those years he was entrusted with the festive Oratory on Sundays. With his great activity and knowledge of what to do, he had it swarming with boys and flourishing once more.

“He had great ability in acting in the theatre and always played serious and sustained roles. I recall when he played the part of the Tribune Valente in ‘*Pistrine*’ (Bakeries) written by our Fr Lemoyne. He embodied that character with such pride and dignity that he looked to be a real Roman Legionary. The agility and elasticity with which he leaped up in the bakery, and the affection and fraternal solicitude with which he defended poor Cecilia from the cruel priest of the idols who wanted to sacrifice her. It was almost a revelation of what would become fact later in defending his flock once he had become a bishop in China.

“In fact as soon as I heard of his tragic and cruel death defending the young women who accompanied him what immediately came to mind was that image of him in Rome on our stage, in the act of defending Cecilia.”<sup>6</sup>

### **“They loved him deeply”**

A fine page from Fr Luigi Terrone’s lengthy report seeks to offer us the moral figure of Versiglia as a cleric, and his effective apostolic activity.

“I saw Cleric Versiglia For the first time in October 1892 in Rome when he was about to begin his third year Philosophy at the Gregorian University.

“The first impression he aroused in me, a seventeen year old at the time, was that he was a very reflective, serious cleric, even, I would say, more serious than his age and his being a student would suggest. As I compared him to our other student friends, my opinion of him only grew and never changed over the many years I had the pleasure of being with him or dealing with him.

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4 Certainly in 1922, when the Bishop came to Turin for the General Chapter. On this occasion also cleric Caravario visited Bishop Versiglia and told him of his desire to become a missionary in China.

5 *Memorie di Don Alessio Barberis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

6 *Memorie di Don Carlo Catanzariti*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

“My wonder at his seriousness grew when I noted that it did not contradict his lively and ardent temperament. On feast days, at academies and theatre evenings for the festive oratory, he was always among the most active, and leading them...

“The youngsters at the oratory loved him deeply; and those whom he taught catechism to on Sundays wouldn’t leave him. He enchanted them not only in class but also in recreation with his stories and his general approach.

“In those years the festive oratory, entrusted entirely to students at the Gregorian University, was at the height of its growth. The clerics gave it all their youthful zest and were completely selfless in doing so. On Sundays and other feast days, from early morning to late evening, they all stayed on the job, in the courtyard, in the meeting rooms for the sodalities, preparing ‘*teatrino*’, singing, ceremonies. Only in the evening, shortly before supper, did the Rector bring them together and converse with them, so each could tell his little story of success, or what had happened. They offered suggestions for changes for upcoming celebrations, worked out programmes and approaches to more effectively attract the large number of youngsters in the district.

“While taking an active part in these discussions, Versiglia was always the one who kept a lid in the enthusiasm, so as not to run the risk of exaggerating or going overboard. And to be honest, his word, due to the seriousness I have indicated, always had special authority and weight.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Intimate and heartfelt feelings**

This was how his companions saw Versiglia as a cleric. A range of letters to Fr Barberis and Fr Bianchi allow us to see him from within, in his intimate and heartfelt feelings and his habitual self-regard. In all these letters there is always a keen desire to grow in virtue and love of God, a deep humility which led him to emphasise his lack of spiritual progress. But the great ideal remained constantly and clearly before him, the ideal which motivated his call: to be a missionary.

In a letter to Fr Giulio Barberis on 6 January 1891, we see the trio re-emerge: Versiglia, Alessio Barberis, and Giuganino.

“I assure you,” he writes “that much good can be done among these youngsters at the festive oratory, who often exceed three hundred in number. My companions do a lot of good because they themselves are very good and fervent; I do less so. What I mean is that I work hard but I do little.

“Only on Christmas Eve were we free from work at the oratory. That was a truly beautiful and consoling evening for us. I had the good fortune to serve at the Sung Mass with Alessio Barberis and Giuganino: I was the thurifer and they were acolytes. That night I prayed so much for you and for all the confreres at Valsalice and Foglizzo, and I also made some good resolutions.”<sup>8</sup>

In the same letter, recalling the fervent piety in the upper room at Valsalice under the guidance of that great master of the spirit who was Fr Giulio Barberis, he gave the impression of having gone backwards on his spiritual journey because he was more distracted by the outside environment. This expression of humility is often repeated in his letter during 1891. The year ended with a letter to Fr Barberis, dated 30 December It deserves to be quoted at least in part.

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<sup>7</sup> *Memorie di Don Luigi Terrone*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>8</sup> *Lettere a Don Giulio Barberis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers

## **The desire for holiness and the thirst to save souls**

“I spent the feast of Christmas well” he writes. “I sought to prepare myself for it with some mortification and by carrying out my duties more exactly.

“We are now on the cusp of the new year, which I want to commence with real fervour because I want to obtain some special graces from the Sacred Heart. I see that many of my companions are leaving for the missions and many are already at work there. I also see that this would still be impossible for me for two years! Oh, if only the Lord, once these two years have passed, would grant me this grace of being able to become an apostle anywhere in the world, so long as there is work and there are souls to save! But may his will be done. As for desire and willingness, I am truly ready to go anywhere: just that I feel I do not have sufficient virtue. However, I place my hope in the most holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary. For my part I want to do everything possible over these two years to prepare myself. Help me with your prayers and advice.”<sup>9</sup>

He adds in a postscript: “I intend this letter to also serve as a request for the Missions, wherever the Superiors believe it would be good to send me.”

## **One of my companions is already a missionary**

A year later, at the end of 1892, the departure of cleric Giovanni Martinasso for the missions in America gave his friend Versiglia a chance to manifest his state of mind to his former novice master, Fr Bianchi. He wrote on 22 December 1892:

“Now I see how important it was to correspond to the many graces the Lord gave us when we were at Foglizzo, and to the concerns you and all the Superiors had for us. I ascribe the fact that I am so behind in virtue to my lack of correspondence to these graces and these kindnesses. Many of my companions, because of their virtue, have already deserved to be missionaries, and others are doing much good in various houses. Over these days Martinasso is leaving for America. While I am happy for them, I cannot but be envious of them. Due to my faults and defects, perhaps I will not be able to receive this grace!... Recommend me to the Lord that I may do what he, in his mercy, has planned.”<sup>10</sup>

## **Degree in philosophy**

On 9 July, cleric Versiglia told Fr Bianchi that he was at the end of his three-year course at the Philosophy Faculty at the Gregorian University:

“On 15 June I did the written paper for my degree on the topic of the existence of God, and on 3 July I did the oral exams. Things went well, thanks to the Lord and our Blessed Mother. I see that you had people praying for me. Thank you so much for that and I am asking you to get them to continue praying so that, now that I am free from the business of studying, I can get to work, if not in pursuing a doctorate in love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus, then at least getting top marks and a Bachelors! And so that, given the increasing summer warmth outside, the flame of love for the most

<sup>9</sup> *Lettere a Don Giulio Barberis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers

<sup>10</sup> *Lettere a Don Eugenio Bianchi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

lovable Heart of Jesus may not be totally extinguished within me... Now I will write to Fr Cerruti, and I await his orders!”<sup>11</sup>

Fr Francesco Cerruti was the General Councillor for Schools on whom being assigned as a member of the teaching staff depended. And the response came.

### **Teacher of philosophy and assistant to the novices at Foglizzo**

Due to an invitation from Cardinal Parocchi, who expressed the wish of Pope Leo XIII, Fr Rua had accepted direction of the Leonine Institute at Orvieto, due to open in November 1893. Its first Rector was Fr Arturo Conelli, described by Fr Ceria ias “of true worth, formed at Don Bosco’s school.”<sup>12</sup>

He had been Prefect of Studies and a teacher of cleric Versiglia’s during the novitiate at Foglizzo. His pupil, barely twenty years old, was called to replace such an authoritative teacher. During the year at Foglizzo they were friends who shared many confidences due to their common missionary ideal and the famous dreams of Don Bosco about China.

The new graduates from the Gregorian received their doctoral degree at a solemn ceremony on Friday 24 October 1893, in the Church of St Ignatius, near the tombs of Sts Aloysius and John Berkmans,. The new ‘Doctor’ Versiglia was there, along with a group of his friends from *Sacro Cuore* who came with him to celebrate with him.<sup>13</sup>

By three o’clock the same day he was already on the train, heading for Foglizzo.<sup>14</sup>

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11 *Lettere a Don Eugenio Bianchi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

12 *Annali*, II, 384

13 The graduation certificate bears the date 23 October 1893; Arch. Sal. 9, 1, Vers.

14 Cf. *Lettera a Don Eugenio Bianchi*, dated 22 October 1893, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

## FIRST ASSIGNMENT IN SALESIAN APOSTOLATE

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Assistant and teacher of the novices

1893–1896

### **The most respected since Fr Bianchi**

I have before me the testimonies of twenty former novices from the three year period when cleric Versiglia was assistant and teacher at the novitiate in Foglizzo: eight from the first year, six from the second and seven from the third. All are in agreement in saying that cleric Versiglia was the most respected in that role since Fr Bianchi.

“There were a number of Superiors at the novitiate” one says “but after Fr Bianchi, 'Don' Versiglia<sup>1</sup> was the most authoritative and characteristic figure.”<sup>2</sup>

This is saying something if we consider who Fr Bianchi was in terms of the respect shown him by the generations who knew him, and if we bear in mind that there were older and well-valued confreres in the novitiate house.

Besides, cleric Versiglia's job of following up the 130 or so young 15 or 16-year-old clerics both day and night, and correcting what was less praiseworthy in their behaviour, was no simple task nor was it the most pleasant one. Yet all are in agreement in saying that not only was he the most respected but also the most loved, even if he was strict. This strictness is also a common feature in all the testimonies, and it needed to be that way for a large group of 130 young men to go ahead as they should and for the setting to be formative.

“He had only graduated a few months earlier,” one novice in the first school year 1893–94 said “but he immediately showed an extraordinary ability in teaching. In our group (Section A) all of us were exceptionally happy with and proud of him.”<sup>3</sup>

### **A teacher who was clear, friendly, respected and loved by everyone**

Having mentioned Section A gives us the opportunity to introduce the testimony of a famous Salesian who knew something about school since he himself was a great and learned teacher, Fr Pietro Trevisan.

“I got to know Bishop Versiglia in 1893 at Foglizzo, where I was making my novitiate. We had cleric Giuganino as our philosophy teacher in Section B. His health was poor, though, and toward

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1 In Salesian houses, 'Don' was used of both priests and clerics who were assistants and teachers. Hence the expression 'Don Versiglia' and 'cleric Versiglia' mean the same thing. This will be even more noticeable in later chapters in reference to 'Don' Callisto as a cleric.

2 *Memorie di Don Carlo Simona*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

3 *Memorie di Don Magno Selvatico*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

December he had to abandon his post as teacher, which we were not at all happy about since he had shown himself to be knowledgeable and a good speaker.”<sup>4</sup>

“And then one day, perhaps close to Christmas, lo and behold another cleric turned up, somewhat more unassuming, less outspoken. Initially he also seemed to be less gifted. While Giugnano would digress through the various philosophical systems, including modern ones, Versiglia kept roughly to the text, which was Canelli's *Logic and Ontology*, still in lithographic form. To put it briefly, he explained the text sentence by sentence, while his predecessor would head off in Lord knows what direction then indicate the amount of text to be studied for the next day, maybe without having said anything about what we had to study.

“Cleric Versiglia explained the text to us in Latin, and this helped us no end to learn the text, which was also in Latin. He also immediately became our general assistant, so he was with us for the entire day, even when we went for walks, while our first teacher was with us almost only in the classroom.

“Very soon the new teacher of philosophy, who came from the Gregorian in Rome, won everyone's sympathy as a good friend without imposing himself either in class or outside it. We gradually came to have much respect for him because he seemed to us to be very devout, and also calm and smiling, always in control of himself and his words. He showed a maturity of judgement and balance well beyond his twenty years of age. When he had to correct us he did so with a certain seriousness but always with fatherly kindness.

“He had a range of gifts which made him respected and loved by everyone, even though he was only three or four years older than us. He was very fair, not showing particular preference or dislike for anyone, although in a novitiate of 133 clerics, there was the whole gamut of types, some even without a real vocation, as the future would reveal and, in certain cases, one could even see that immediately.

“I have spoken in the plural spontaneously without realising it, because I am convinced that my own feelings toward our philosophy teacher were shared by everyone.”<sup>5</sup>

We can link another testimony to this, one among the more characteristic of this 1893–94 school year, from Fr Angelo Calcagno.

“In the 1893–94 school year I had the cleric Versiglia as philosophy teacher. He was as unbending as Cato the Elder but in a dignified and noble way, vigilant and prudent. He was a good educator, a formator with an austere manner, disdainful of any kind of vulgarity or weakness. He had a refined psychological insight about him. His experience of human weakness inclined him ever so slightly towards pessimism, but it was a manly pessimism full of faith in the possibility that every human being could recover. He missed nothing as an assistant; as a teacher he was clear, precise, methodical, enthusiastic about his subject but not brilliant, as they used say.

“He sensed the tragic seriousness of life, or that was how I saw it at the time. Later I had no further opportunity to meet him. But this was the idea that he seemed to present to me, clearly, by his behaviour.

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<sup>4</sup> This was cleric Luigi Giuganino, Versiglia's companion at the Gregorian in Rome. He was sent to Alassio so the better climate there could help him.

<sup>5</sup> *Memorie di Don Pietro Trevisan*, Arch. Sal., 9, 2, Vers.



“I was just seventeen at the time, and one of the wilder kids in common estimation: scatterbrained, undisciplined, a bit rebellious, arrogant, but genuine, sincere and unselfish. Don Versiglia understood me and tried to improve me, with an almost Benedictine patience and even an exquisitely Salesian one.

“There was the forbearance he showed in trying to teach me a main role in a play which we put on for the unforgettable Fr Eugenio Bianchi's name day, in December 1893! For a whole month he shouted himself hoarse and conquered my riotous behaviour!

“He was patient but strong, demanding, and unbending.

“In the refectory he had me sit near him to keep a better eye on me and dampen my exuberance. Eventually I snapped. He held me back forcefully and I said: 'I don't know what to do. I am made this way: *Ipse jecit nos, non ipsi nos*: It is he that made us, and we are his.(Ps 100:3)'

“Don Versiglia said nothing and paled.

“This is it, I thought: now comes the storm!

“But nothing! He was calm and steady. Then he said, calmly: ‘No, you have to get control of yourself; you must and you can; it is a matter of willpower.’ Then, looking me straight in the eye he offered me an apple.

“He was like a lion with honeycomb.<sup>6</sup> How could one not love him?”<sup>7</sup>

### **A good psychologist and a good friend**

There is one moving testimony by a good Salesian, a great worker, whom I will mention in passing.

“I made my novitiate in 1893–94” he writes. “I had come from the Oratory at Valdocco with a reputation as a clown, because they always gave me comic parts on stage.

“In that comic role I had become very popular, so much so that even my confessor, Fr Michael Rua, called me by the various names of the comic roles I played so successfully.

“This reputation did me no good in the novitiate: whatever I did I was the cause of laughter... and then disarray. I was quite upset by this inwardly. I wanted to stop going on stage completely; but on every occasion I was obliged to accept the part I was given, and naturally it was a comic role. In the common estimation, being a clown on stage meant I became something of a buffoon in real life. Even my surname conspired against me: it was a short step from ‘Buffa’ to ‘Buffone’; especially since I was rather large and overweight, and the nickname fitted me well.

“Bad conduct marks came thick and fast, to my great displeasure and disappointment. At the end of the novitiate year, Fr Rua had to personally intervene for me to be admitted to religious profession. The only one who stood beside me as a good friend, who understood my situation, supported and defended me, was my assistant Don Versiglia. By following me up daily, with great insight and serene fairness, he knew how to differentiate my person from the roles I was obliged to

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6 Cf. Judges 14:8-9

7 *Memorie di Don Angelo Calcagno*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

play on stage, and which my fellow novices, for fun, willingly identified me with, even in everyday real life.”<sup>8</sup>

In no time, young cleric Versiglia succeeded in gaining control of the large number of novices and was respected and loved, as we can see from a further five testimonies from 1893–94 which highlight his gifts of government, uprightness, patience, humility in the way he fled from praise,<sup>9</sup> his exact fulfilment of his duties, his self-imposed austerity, cheerfulness during recreation.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth quoting at least another two of six testimonies from the second year of his practical training at Foglizzo, during the 1894–95 school year. They offer a different point of view: they highlight Versiglia's personality and work ethic; the second of them focuses more especially and in more detail on two characteristic features.

### **Model novitiate assistant**

“Memories of him?” writes Fr Antonioli. “Not so many after so many years. We cleric novices respected for him for his frankness, always being cheerful but serious when it was time to be, and especially for his deep and sincere piety. It seems to me that he lacked nothing as a model assistant to the novices. He was always in our midst, and always there before us in good example.

“I remember his commitment to philosophy class and how he tried to get us to understand the principles that were a bit abstract for us. Many of us weren't much older than 15 or 16, and only had third or fourth year secondary as background. Grateful to our teacher we loved the subject, debated, held contests and dissertations as if we were true philosophers.

“At times he would share confidences with us in recreation or during walks. He spoke to us of the beauty of missionary life, devoted entirely to the salvation of souls. He told us of the desire he had to be a missionary one day and then, joking, added that he would really go to the missions and become bishop of ... Calcutta no less! He made me his secretary ... In fact, as a joke he no longer called me by my name but ... ‘secretary’, and I was happy about that. Many years later, when he was already bishop in China, I met him in Turin (maybe the only time I had the good fortune to see him again after my novitiate), and laughingly, I asked him if he kept his promise. He also started laughing: ‘Yes, I promised to call you to be my secretary when I became bishop of ... Calcutta. I am not that yet so you'll have to wait!’”<sup>11</sup>

### **Spirit of piety and serene cheerfulness**

The second testimony specifies two features.

“The impressions of our assistant” Fr Alieri writes “which immediately come to mind are two: his composure in church, which revealed his spirit of piety, and his natural seriousness and goodness as an assistant. Before me I can picture our assistant kneeling in his usual place, at the head of the pew, with his hands joined and gently resting on the pew, kneeling upright, his head slightly bent forward while he was with us novices during the practices of piety. There was nothing

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8 *Memorie di Don Giovanni Buffa*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

9 Cf. *Memorie di Don Severino Anedda*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

10 Cf. *Memorie di Don Carlo Atesina*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

11 *Memorie di Don Francesco Antonioli*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

outstanding or affected about this devout attitude of his, which revealed his inner spirit of recollection, and it aroused wonder in us: he was a natural example for us, a nice introduction to recollection and devotion.

“During recreation, Don Versiglia was always the heart and soul of our games but also calm and serene. I never recall him getting upset when, as often happens in the thick of a game, we would have arguments. He never wanted to force his opinion on us: instead he tried to calm and reconcile the more lively spirits among us with his kind and mannerly approach.

“In the study hall he was naturally strict but not sullen and his approach invited us to fulfil our tasks rather than him forcing us to.”<sup>12</sup>

### **A penetrating profile**

A concise but penetrating overview comes from Fr Giuseppe Divina.

“He was precise and alert in assistance, almost to exaggeration. In study, recreation he kept a constant eye on everything but not oppressively. He was unsparing in his observations but knew how to make them at the appropriate time and with much charity and serenity. He demanded observance of the rules, but led by example. He was a tireless worker, could come down hard but gently, though always hard on those who showed they were lazy. He was intransigent with people who had the gift of intelligence but did not give what they could and should.

“He was indulgent with people who were a bit slower and always ready to help and encourage. He had a deep piety, never put on in any way. Some of his companions who were a little more of the sentimental type thought it was a cold piety, a bit prim and formal. In my view it was the result of self-control and an aversion to any outward show which detracted from the spirit.”<sup>13</sup>

### **A priest at twenty two and a half years of age**

As a cleric, Versiglia added the study of theology to his role as assistant and teacher, so he could be promoted to Holy Orders. On 16 September 1894, he received the tonsure and Minor Orders in Turin, and the year after, on 21 September 1895, the Subdiaconate. Then on 29 September the Diaconate.<sup>14</sup>

It was necessary to request dispensation of age for him to be ordained priest, as prescribed by Canon Law: Versiglia was only 22 years old on 5 June. A dispensation of eighteen months was requested. The Superiors were convinced by his serious preparation and spiritual maturity, beyond his age. Cleric Versiglia had shown clear proof of this over seven years of Salesian life.

Don Versiglia recalled the privilege granted him with gratitude and, with a keen sense of responsibility, the words with which Fr Paul Albera, Spiritual Director of the Salesian Congregation, announced it to him: “Act in such a way that the Superiors will not regret granting this exception.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Memorie di Don Temistocle Alieri*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>13</sup> *Memorie di Don Giuseppe Divina*, Arch. Sal., 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>14</sup> Documents relating to the ordinations are in Arch. Sal. 9, 1, Vers.

<sup>15</sup> *Summ.* p. 150.

His priestly ordination took place in the Ivrea Cathedral, the ordaining bishop being Bishop Augustine Richelmy, on 21 December 1895.

Christmas 1895 was an unforgettable celebration of intimate spiritual joy for all the Salesian community at Foglizzo, who gathered around the new priest with sincere affection. He was respected and loved by them all. The priestly character seemed to bestow a new aura on someone who had already profoundly impacted on the minds and hearts of everyone. Nor did he allow the holy atmosphere of those memorable days to be distracted by other festivities outside. He did not even go to his home town, content as he was with the immense joy of his clerics and the presence of his closest relatives.<sup>16</sup>

### **The most important ... and humble figure**

In the 1895–96 school year, the Rector and novice master, Fr Bianchi, was absent for some months due to illness. There were occasional replacements in Fr Giulio Barberis, the first novice master for the Salesian Congregation, Fr Paul Albera, Spiritual Director of the Congregation. Meanwhile the clerical community was focused even more on their exemplary newly ordained priest and assistant.

“After our novice master Fr Bianchi, he was the most important figure for us” attests a novice from that year. “We felt spontaneous respect for him due to his solid virtues, his exemplariness and his outstanding manner of dealing with the difficult role he had.”<sup>17</sup> The respect he was surrounded with did nothing to lessen his humility.

“One day,” another of the novices from that year tells us “Fr Versiglia had been a bit strict with us clerics and had shouted at us. In the evening, in the little group gathered around him during recreation, he apologised jokingly: ‘Be patient! I was brought up on donkey’s milk since I was little; and some of the consequences are still with me.’”<sup>18</sup>

### **A profound analysis by a pupil who then became a learned professor**

We have a true and profound study of this final year of Don Versiglia's practical training at Foglizzo, and his first year of priesthood by one of his pupils, Fr Lorenzo Nigra, who was then for many years professor of History and Patristics at the International Theological Institute at Foglizzo and at the Crocetta in Turin, as well as Provincial in Palestine and Novara. He died in Turin in 1951.

Fr Nigra confirms that Fr Versiglia had a reputation for being strict; but this reputation was justified by the difficult task he had, by his keen sense of responsibility and his deep love of order. It was a strictness suggested by great zeal and charity toward everyone, nothing personal or overpassionate about it.

“Fr Versiglia treated everyone equally,” he writes “strict with the novices when circumstances demanded it, and strict with himself always. He led by example, work and self-sacrifice; he was immensely rich in charity. The more we got to know him the more we were inclined to respect and

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Memorie di Don Lorenzo Nigra*, pp. 1–2, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>17</sup> *Memorie di Don Lorenzo Nigra*, p. 4, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>18</sup> *Memorie di Don Giuseppe Festini*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

love him, because we saw in him the true educator formed in the spirit of Don Bosco, someone who directly and sought the good of souls alone and who was guided by a supernatural purpose alone, with no self-love or sentimentality involved.

“Such behaviour could not be separated from deep piety and a constant outlook of supernatural faith in every one of life's circumstances.”<sup>19</sup>

### **The episode of cleric Pastorino's recovery**

“We had one sick cleric in the house, Paolo Pastorino, who later died as parish priest at Vercelli” Fr Nigra goes on to say. “He had been a novice the preceding year. He came to Foglizzo with his companions from Valsalice on a walk, and was struck down by an illness that kept him bedridden for a long time, since it was one of those unforgiving kinds of illness. We prayed for him, made novenas for him; but he gave no signs of improvement. Fr Versiglia came into the act then, starting a novena to St Michael the Archangel, after whom the church at the novitiate was named. He was putting the powerful archangel to the test we might say, expecting that the patient would be able to turn up in church by the last day of the novena to take his regular part in the practices of piety and thank his healer.

“He led us capably throughout the novena, endeavouring to maintain and increase our fervour, so much so that we all hoped that the Lord would grant this grace even though humanly speaking it seemed impossible.

“In fact, on the last day of the novena, cleric Pastorino did come to church, was present for Mass, made his thanksgiving communion and from that day on his health rapidly improved and he was able to return to Valsalice to continue his studies.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Devotee of the Sacred Heart**

“A feature of his piety,” Fr Nigra goes on to say “was his devotion to the Sacred Heart, a devotion very much nurtured in Salesian novitiates. Its apostle was Fr Beltrami. The Feast of the Sacred Heart was preceded by a month of preparation, the month of the Sacred Heart, and celebrated with the greatest solemnity. The assistant at the novitiate was the heart and soul of this preparation and the one who took on the material work, at the head of a group of clerics, to ensure that the feast would also be solemnly celebrated in its external aspect.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Attention to liturgy**

“Another feature of his piety was his attention to liturgy and the liturgical ceremonies. He taught this to the novices and was a well-prepared and precise teacher, also most exact in celebrating these

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19 *Memorie di Don Lorenzo Nigra*, pp. 4–8; Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

20 *Ibid.* pp. 8-9. This is the Fr Paolo Pastorino whose testimony we spoke of earlier regarding foreknowledge of Fr Arturo Canelli as the initiator of the China mission. The fact of his recovery is confirmed by other testimonies from that year. On 23 April 1941, one of these wrote: "I also saw that Fr Versiglia had great faith as shown by cleric Pastorino's illness. He was gravely ill and Versiglia asked him to come to church just when we were all praying for his recovery. I saw Pastorino walk into church ..." *Memorie di Don Ferdinando Ganio*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

21 *Memorie di Don Lorenzo Nigra*, pp. 9–10.

ceremonies himself. His teaching also made me zealous for the liturgy and ceremonies. What I learned from him I have never forgotten.”<sup>22</sup>

“At the end of the year, and before our novitiate year finished,” Fr Nigra concludes “our assistant was taken from us because in summer 1896 he was asked to look after the new novices on holidays at Cuorgnè. We understood that such an appointment was a mark of respect and trust by the Superiors and that it also marked a first step to other more important appointments. Our predictions were not wrong.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Final summer in Piedmont**

We have a vivid report of Fr Versiglia's summer at Cuorgnè from Fr Alessandro Aureli. It needs no presentation since it speaks for itself.

“For the summer holidays in 1896,” he writes “we were sent to the beautiful college at Cuorgnè for our summer residence. It was just that year, through the competent efforts of Fr Stefano Trione, that the City Council there had entrusted it to the Salesians. We are not talking about a well set-up college at that stage. Everything had to start from scratch. Fr Versiglia was put in charge of this.

“During that year, I had to front up to some difficult examinations, and I was invited by Fr Giulio Barberis to choose a summer residence which would be somewhat relaxed. I was thinking of Piova. But when I heard that Fr Versiglia would be the Rector at Cuorgnè, I went back to Fr Barberis and asked him to let me go there. Versiglia had been a subordinate of mine in a certain sense: I had been his assistant when he was doing his Fifth Year of high school at Valsalice. Fr Barberis was afraid that my presence could put Fr Versiglia in a subordinate role.

‘Don't be afraid of that’ I assured him.

‘Okay ...’ Fr Barberis said this with his simple and kindly approach, ‘but you, with your occasional recklessness, will cause complications ...’

‘Never fear. I can give you my word.’

“I was allowed to go to Cuorgnè. We were together for about two months and Fr Versiglia was outstanding: humble, prudent, caring, he looked after that group of around eighty young lads such that everything went ahead in excellent fashion. He often sought my advice, maintaining that I was able to give him good advice.

‘Dear Versiglia! I can hardly teach cats how to climb!’

‘Not at all! Answer my questions and then together we can do better.’

“Animated by an unfailing spirit of prayer, he passed this on to the boys through his angelic celebration of Mass, his impeccable life, his persuasive and convincing words. When he gave the goodnight, as is usually done in Salesian houses, and there was some little thing to be corrected, he knew how to do it with fatherly words and wise advice. He corrected them but nobody was bitter about it. He knew how to be a faithful copy of our great father Don Bosco in his wisdom.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Memorie di Don Alessandro Aureli*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.



## FORMATOR OF RELIGIOUS AND PRIESTLY SOULS

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Rector and novice master

1896–1905

### The new novitiate at Genzano

Up until 1892, the novitiate at Foglizzo for clerics and the one at San Benigno for coadjutors had taken the aspirants from all five provinces in Italy.

In 1892, the Sicilian Province had its own novitiate, at first temporarily in two houses and then, in 1894, it finally settled at San Gregorio, Catania.<sup>1</sup>

In 1896, the Roman Province was able to set up its own novitiate at Genzano. Next to it a flourishing oratory arose; in fact it came into existence a few months before the novitiate did.

A nobleman, Flavio Jacobini, offered the property and the two devout Pagliaroli sisters helped generously with construction of the building.<sup>2</sup>

Construction works lasted two years. “And when it came time for the opening” Fr Tommaso Chiapello writes “we noticed that the architect had forgotten the toilets. The Provincial, Fr Cesare Cagliero, had to take the novices already accepted to Sacro Cuore in Rome.”<sup>3</sup>

Halfway through April 1896, the Provincial, Fr Cesare Cagliero, sent newly-ordained Fr Emanuele Manassero to Genzano. He had been ordained on 4 April. He was to take a look at the new house where they wanted to open a festive oratory. But the building works were running well behind: there were no doors, windows, flooring. The staircase lacked a balustrade.

Back in Rome, Fr Manassero told the Provincial: “The house at Genzano needs doors that can be locked before we can open the place.” Besides, the parish priest had shown preference for postponing the imminent opening date at the beginning of May, fearful that he would lose choir boys in the parish.<sup>4</sup>

### The festive oratory

The oratory was opened halfway through June 1896, without any formalities or solemnity, while work continued on the building. Fr Manassero and cleric Luigi Giudici (who later became a

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<sup>1</sup> *Annali*, II, pp. 216–217.

<sup>2</sup> *Annali*, II, p. 615.

<sup>3</sup> *Memorie di Don Tommaso Chiapello*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers. Fr Tommaso Chiapello was the first Rector of the Salesian house at Frascati, opened in October 1896.

<sup>4</sup> *Memorie di Don Emanuele Manassero*, pp. 26–27, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.



missionary to America) came from Rome on the Saturday afternoon. They set themselves up as best they could, looked after the oratory on the Sunday, and left again on the Monday. Boys came in droves ... and soon exceeded four hundred.

In July, Fr Manassero gained his degree in theology at the Gregorian. At the end of summer he left for Turin to visit his home town, Benevagienna in the province of Cuneo, celebrated some of his first Masses there and took part in the retreat at Foglizzo.

Before Fr Manassero left Rome, the Provincial, Fr Cagliari, told him that he would be the Rector of the new house at Genzano. But when he was in Foglizzo, surrounded by a group of clerics, he met Fr Rua who had just come from Ivrea to preside at the retreat. He greeted him, saying: "Well then Rev. Catechist of the novitiate at Foglizzo!" Fr Manassero was surprised at the change of direction but breathed a sigh of relief because the new task was much easier than the former.<sup>5</sup>

### **Rector and Novice master at Genzano**

Once the retreat was over, Fr Manassero went to find Fr Versiglia at Cuornè. He arrived in the evening just at dusk. When he entered the small Franciscan cloister at the college, he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder and saw Fr Versiglia: "You've played a nice trick on me, offloading the leadership of Genzano onto me!"<sup>6</sup>

He said so with a real sense of regret, because he was convinced he had neither the ability nor the virtue for that office. He was just 23, but he did not lack the basics of humility. Fr Barberis and Fr Rua, who knew him well since his first profession at Valsalice, had also seen wisdom in him for governing, and the virtues needed to be a good novice master.

Fr Lorenzo Nigra, a novice that year, testifies: "Although only later, I knew precisely that Fr Rua had special respect and fatherly affect for Fr Versiglia. So he was appointed as the first Rector and Novice master at Genzano ... He was still there for our religious profession at Foglizzo on 4 October 1896, and on the 17th he left for Rome."<sup>7</sup>

### **The opening of the new house: a Rector who was "incapable of doing anything good"!**

On 17 October 1896, Fr Versiglia arrived in Rome to take up his role looking after the novices who were at Sacro Cuore waiting for the house at Genzano to be ready.

The transfer from Sacro Cuore and the beginnings of the new novitiate at Genzano are described in a long letter from Fr Versiglia to Fr Bianchi, dated 17 November 1896.<sup>8</sup> Better than any other description, it helps us to relive the situation as well as understand Fr Versiglia.

"Beloved Fr Rector, a month has already gone by since I finally left Foglizzo, and I can hardly believe it still. One learns to appreciate something when one has lost it! Sometimes I am at my desk working and my imagination goes back to Foglizzo. I see myself back as an assistant watching over the study hall: Nigra on one side, Cimatti on the other; Rotondi at the back, gesticulating!... On

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 27–29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> *Memorie di Don Lorenzo Nigra*, p. 12, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>8</sup> Eight pages in tiny, tidy handwriting which were clear enough under a magnifying glass. It was typical of the letters to Fr Giulio Barberis and Fr Eugenio Bianchi in 1888-1898.

another occasion when I found myself seriously unsure of something, I felt that I had come to knock on the door of your office hearing you say ‘come in’ and asking: This has happened to me: what should I do? Then I shake myself and come back to reality: registers, sermons, conferences, confessions ... and then it feels really tough to have left Foglizzo.

“It is good that I always have the Sacred Heart by my side and that I recall him during these moments! This seems to give me courage, fires me up; and then I say: Courage! Go ahead in the name of the Lord! It is not that things are going badly yet: No! Indeed, thanks to the Lord and the Sacred Heart, they are going very well, at least for the moment. But what bothers me is first of all seeing my absolute inability to do any good while there is so much to be done and one could do so much good. Oh! There is no danger here of thinking thoughts of pride and vanity!

“We are 34 individuals here in all, of whom 17 are novices, students, and four are artisans. But will I succeed in drawing any good out of them? I am very much afraid, not so much because they are not good and suitable material but because I lack the ability to work with it. Oh! How often I regret not having done more to let the Superiors know of my inability and insufficiency, and not having insisted more that I not be saddled with such a difficult task! I believe that if I were still in Turin, the Superiors would not have sent me here.

“But meanwhile, here I am! I can do no other than say with St Martin, no longer ‘Lord, if I am still necessary to your people ...’, because I feel completely useless and perhaps even detrimental, but ‘if this is Your will, I refuse no labour.’ But enough of this topic. I will tell you how the house is going and what we are doing.”

### **From Rome to Genzano with the first group of novices**

“First of all we had the opening of the house on the first Friday of the month, 6 November. The evening before, I picked up my young charges in Rome and gave them a brief conference on the Sacred Heart. Then I explained my plan to them that the following day we would go for the opening of the house and begin our year under the patronage of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. They were very happy about this, and this was how we decided to proceed.

“The morning after, on the 7th, we departed from Rome’s station for Albano. During the trip we maintained a general sense of recollection. Everyone was impatiently looking forward to finding himself in the new house. We got to Albano at 8 a.m. and by 8.45 a.m. we were at Genzano. We did this last part of the journey on foot. The welcome was subdued because no one knew the precise day of our arrival. Just the same there was no lack of flags hanging from the terrazzo and some friends of the house greeted us warmly.

“We immediately went to the chapel. I celebrated Holy Mass there and the others all went to communion. Only the Lord knows if I celebrated with devotion that day! I would have liked to have had the fervour of the Seraphim, or at least of the Sister disciple of the Sacred Heart, Blessed Margaret [Mary Alacoque], to be able to draw the necessary graces from the bottomless resource of His goodness, so we could successful do His holy will in everything.

“After Mass we recited the Chaplet of the Sacred Heart. There was no Benediction because we lacked a monstrance, cope, humeral veil and thurible.”

## **First days in the new house**

“Once our little ceremony was over we went to have some breakfast. Then our ‘babies’ went off cheerfully rummaging through the entire house and surrounding grounds. What a pity that we didn’t find any thousand lire notes!

“The day was spent putting the few things we had in order. That did not take too long because we really had very little. What did take a long time, though, was working out how to supply for what we lacked, the many unforeseen things, and many other things besides which we had foreseen but had not yet been able to provide for.

“The next day, Saturday, we had the Exercise for a Happy Death: two conferences and two meditations along with the other established practices, because we wanted to really get started properly.

“On Sunday, some of the novices were involved at the festive Oratory, and the others stayed behind in the study hall. On Monday, classes began.

“I mentioned the festive Oratory. For four or five Sundays the number of boys had been fewer. Yesterday they increased, reaching 250; then towards evening there were more than 400. They are rough lads but deep down they are good. They are very attentive when we are telling them something. and if we are telling them a story, they wait with bated breath. I hope we can do much good with them because, at least this is how it seems to me, their parents too are keen that their children come to the Oratory regularly.<sup>9</sup>

“I have heard that the clothing of a good number of clerical novices has already taken place at Foglizzo. Here we do not know when we will do that. Up until to now I have not yet been able to get to know many of my novices, we will see!”

He then goes on to ask for some second-hand church furniture that would be more than useful for his chapel, which was devoid of pretty much everything, then there is a final mention of homesickness for Foglizzo.<sup>10</sup>

## **Genzano needs someone who knows what to do better than I do**

Foglizzo also comes to his mind and heart once more a month and a half later, in a letter to Fr Barberis, dated 1 January 1897. He raises the question of the Superiors’ choice of Rector at Genzano once more, and his humility shines through.

“I am missing Foglizzo,” he writes “and Genzano is missing Fr Manassero. Oh, if you could only make the swap! Nothing would be more to the advantage of the novitiate at Genzano. Foglizzo would certainly lose out: but the novitiate at Foglizzo is already grown up and strong and could put up with the damage, while the one here at Genzano is new and weak and needs someone stronger than me, a man who knows how to do things better than I do.”<sup>11</sup>

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9 He gave a similar description, but more concise, in a letter to Fr Rua, dated 18 November 1896, printed in the *Boll. Sal.*, December 1896, p. 333.

10 *Lettere a Don Eugenio Bianchi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

11 *Lettere a Don Giulio Barberis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

In preferring Fr Versiglia, the Superiors had certainly borne in mind his excellent practical wisdom gained during the three years as teacher and assistant to the novices at Foglizzo, as well as his personal gifts. Fr Manassero had still been attending the Gregorian University in Rome, pursuing his theology degree. After a year as catechist and teacher at Foglizzo, Fr Manassero was appointed Rector of the house and following that was also given other key roles.

### **We hear from a novice from that first year at Genzano**

After listening to the master, let us now hear from a pupil, a novice in that first year at Genzano, Fr Ettore Pavoni.

“Thinking back to Fr Versiglia, I can see him when, as a cleric in Rome, he was attending the Gregorian and made a perfect trio with Fr Emanuele Manassero and Fr Pietro Labò. For us boys they were the perfect examples of religious and scholars. In the play Guilt and Pardon, Versiglia was Emanuele and we gave him the nickname ‘Sacred Heart’.

“Whenever there was a theatrical performance, it was worth the world to see him on the stage playing his ever dignified and noble part, with bearing and voice that gave the impression that he was really experiencing his role as if he were that person.

“I saw him again and had him as novice master in 1896–1897 at Genzano. The poverty and incompleteness of the house, the small number of staff and a thousand other difficulties did not hinder the consoling success of that man’s tireless work and generous sacrifice, who was everything to everyone (1 Cor 9:22), such that all the novices of that first year lived and died in the Congregation other than two or three still alive.

“Among the other recollections there is one that perhaps others have not mentioned. He had read and reread in the refectory and elsewhere the life of a French missionary in China, whose name I do not recall but who was nicknamed ‘The Knight of Christ’. Fr Versiglia was enthusiastic about him and he communicated that enthusiasm to us too, in conversations, encouraging us to imitate him. It seemed that he was yearning from that moment to work in China and save souls in that vast land, as in fact happened.

“Another recollection. I never saw a bed in his bedroom. He had an ottoman he used a lot, and would make us sit on it for our ‘*rendiconto*’. Who knows how many nights he spent working, praying and suffering!”<sup>12</sup>

### **I will always remember my novice master in his little office**

This little office also made an impression on another novice from 1901–1902, Fr Alfonso Rinaldi, who was the first missionary to Ecuador, and then parish priest and Rector at Ancona, Grottaferrata and Tolentino.

“I will always remember my novice master in his little office,” he writes, “where he also slept in a small bed which became a sofa by day. He would receive my ‘*rendiconto*’ with fatherly kindness and open the ways to holiness. He often dried my tears in this little office. My Provincial, Fr

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<sup>12</sup> *Memorie di Don Ettore Pavoni*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

Marenco, who later became an Archbishop, was right when he told me, after accepting me as a novice: ‘Go to Genzano, present yourself to Fr Versiglia, who is waiting for you there, and he will look after everything!’”<sup>13</sup>

### **I will go and find you before the Sacred Heart of Jesus**

The year 1897 ends with a letter to Fr Bianchi, all about his inner life. It was written on 28 December 1897.

“You ask me” writes Fr Versiglia “if I still remember Fr Bianchi. I certainly do remember him! Indeed I could say that a day does not pass without me speaking of you. And since I know where you can always be found, every day I go to where I am sure to find you: before the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. And I pray that He may grant you many consolations over these very difficult years for you.

“I have the impression that the dear master is increasingly detaching his heart from things down here. How lucky you are that you know how to take long drinks from Jesus’ blessed chalice and know how to put devotion to the Sacred Heart into practice, consisting, I believe, in constant sacrifice for Him. I too am trying to understand this devotion well but up till now I know it little and only in theory ... It is true that I say out loud to the Sacred heart: ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ But in my heart I immediately add: ‘Do not ask too much, other wise I will not be able to do it!’ The life of sacrifice is too harsh for me and I always try to mitigate it, endeavouring to find some outward consolation ...

“Pray for me a lot ... Knowing my poverty, I would like you to continue to direct me spiritually by sending me some good advice.”<sup>14</sup>

There was no shortage of suffering. To the novitiate he would add the studentate of philosophy where the novices would go after their profession; the teaching staff would grow, and what Fr Versiglia calls “the simple years” would come to an end, and he would have his cross to carry.

Meanwhile, let us choose some testimonies relating to 1898

### **An expert horseman ...**

Fr Versiglia had kept his missionary ideal very much alive, and as a result of that, had not abandoned the leaning he had as a child toward horses and horse-riding.

Fr Tommaso Chiapello, who had opened the house at Frascati a month before the one at Genzano opened, came to find Fr Versiglia at the novitiate house. On one occasion, Fr Versiglia wanted to go back with him to Frascati in a carriage drawn by a donkey. An accident so frightened the animal that it risked throwing carriage and passengers into Lake Albano below.

“I admired Fr Versiglia at the time, ” Fr Chiapello writes “for his driving and perfect calm, which got us out of danger; and so we were able to continue our journey with tranquillity as far as Frascati.”<sup>15</sup>

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13 *Memorie di Don Alfonso Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

14 *Lettere a Don Eugenio Bianchi* Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

15 *Memorie di Don Tommaso Chiapello*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

“I was fourteen years old,” writes Fr Sante Garelli “when I arrived at the novitiate at Genzano on the evening of the Assumption 1898. Fr Versiglia was the novice master. I was still an untamed foal; he was an expert horseman, master of himself and his mounts. How much patience I caused him to exercise! And how much kindness I made him show! Each day I went to open myself to him ... and to fill myself with him! Conclusion: as soon as I turned sixteen I was put forward by him and accepted by the Provincial for perpetual profession. Perhaps it was rashness on my part; certainly it was wisdom and trusting courage on his part. Courage and faith made him look far forward ... to so many souls who were awaiting the light of faith.”

### **But on one occasion things went wrong**

“Horsemanship was not just a metaphor for him” Fr Garelli goes on to say. “He really did go horse-riding, so he could be ready for apostolic excursions in missionary life.

“On one occasion, however, things went wrong: he fell from his horse and fractured his right foot. He had the courage to get back on the horse and ride back home.<sup>16</sup> But this did not put him off: he gained from the experience and his yearning grew, not only to put up with the break but to risk his life, if necessary, to spread the kingdom of God.

“I don’t know how many times he said to me in the Roman dialect, sometimes seriously, sometimes facetiously: *Che te possino ammazzà* [an imprecation in the Roman dialect, literally ‘May they kill you’ but could be represented by something as simple as ‘damn it all’]... ‘But,’ he added immediately ‘for the Faith!’ He appeared to be saying it to me, but in fact he was saying it to himself – a vague omen of the martyrdom that God would grant him, according to his earnest desire?”<sup>17</sup>

Fr Garelli touches on an issue which is common to the memories of Fr Versiglia’s pupils over these years: his constant desire to be a missionary, and in relation to that, the reference to the time he fell from his horse.

“On one occasion he fell from his horse and broke his foot” writes Fr Giacomo Latini, who was a novice then student of philosophy at Genzano from 1897 to 1900. “But this didn’t stop him. In the morning he dragged himself down to say Mass, resting on the arm of the altar server. He did not stop doing any of his tasks. He also came down to the courtyard, and since he couldn’t play, he was just there during recreation, holding onto the shoulders of one or other confrere. We competed to be near him to have the pleasure of being able to help him and demonstrate our affection this way.”<sup>18</sup>

### **One particularly prophetic remark**

Fr Arturo Conelli, who had been replaced at Foglizzo in 1893 by his disciple, cleric Versiglia, and had then gone to open the Leonine Institute at Orvieto, was transferred to Frascati in October 1898 to replace Fr Chiapello, who went to Castellamare as Rector. Frascati and Genzano are two of the Roman ‘castelli’ closest to each other and Fr Conelli and Fr Versiglia missed no opportunity to

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16 Cf. *Summ.* p. 150.

17 *Memorie di Don Sante Garelli*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

18 *Memorie di Don Giacomo Latini*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

see one another again and pick up once more on their former chats at Foglizzo when novice Versiglia gladly kept company with Fr Conelli in the courtyard to talk about the missions.

This explanation is an appropriate one to clarify one part of an account by Bishop Salvatore Rotolo.

“I was with Fr Versiglia from August 1897 until January 1900, at Genzano, during my novitiate and philosophy years, while he was the Rector and novice master” Bishop Rotolo writes. I have always had fond memories of him, much gratitude and filial affection for him because of his piety, zeal, spirit of sacrifice and exquisite charity to me and others entrusted to his fatherly care, in order to prepare us morally, religiously and also physically to become sons of Saint John Bosco.

“Episodes regarding his life?

“One of these we have recorded in the newsletter for the Pius IX Institute on 2 April 1930, following the murder of our two heroes. Here it is. Fr Versiglia, as a young priest, was at the novitiate house at Genzano with Fr Conelli. One day, jokingly, Fr Versiglia was tormenting Fr Conelli, a candidate ready to depart for China. Fr Conelli, like all the others, knew of Fr Versiglia’s secret aspirations of being a missionary to bring the light of faith to the pagans, and told him: ‘No, I’m not going as a missionary because they are not sending me. You will go to China instead and die a martyr there ...’ It was a particularly prophetic remark.”<sup>19</sup>

## **A difficult year**

I said above that after the “simple years”, Fr Versiglia would not be lacking in moments of suffering.

A testimony of this, with his usual depth and historical precision, has been left us by Fr Lorenzo Nigra, whom we have already heard from as a novice at Foglizzo.

Over the three year period from 1896–99, cleric Nigra attended the Gregorian University in Rome and was able to closely follow his former assistant and teacher. Echoes from Genzano could easily be heard in Rome. Besides, the clerical students at the Gregorian spent their summer holidays in Genzano and cleric Nigra was also invited there to prepare for the feast of the Sacred Heart, which Fr Versiglia wanted to be celebrated as solemnly as it was at Foglizzo. Fr Versiglia had also modelled the life of the new novitiate on Foglizzo. There was a very high level of spirituality at Foglizzo, something that would not have pleased someone affected by a worldly spirit, even under the cover of openness to the times and modern culture.

Foglizzo was simply a novitiate, at was the case initially at Genzano. Then Genzano also became a complete studentate of philosophy, with three levels: the first was the novitiate itself, during which as was then the custom, the novices studied Italian and Latin literature, and philosophy. In the other two courses or levels they were able to give more time to their studies while continuing to live in the general context of the novitiate. Therefore institute had a good number of teachers.

“For the 1899–1900 school year,” writes Fr Nigra “before teaching, I had the good fortune of being sent to Genzano to do philosophy, under the leadership of Fr Versiglia.

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<sup>19</sup> *Memorie di Mons. Salvatore Rotolo*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

“Let me say immediately that it was a critical year for Fr Versiglia. Why? He was not understood, and was hindered by some of the teacher confreres who then left the Congregation. One of them, a fellow student with Fr Versiglia, more clever than intelligent, arrogant and lacking a real sense of piety, had difficulty accepting authority and direction from his former schoolmate and was the cause of underhand disunity among the confreres, something which became detrimental to the teaching staff and the students.

“Another was also very clever, outspoken and extremist. He was the first to leave the Congregation and embrace modernism. Fr Versiglia’s approach was too outdated for him. Some other teachers (confreres) stood behind Fr Versiglia from a purely legal perspective ... One, who was very intelligent, did not take sides. He left the Congregation that year for family reasons.

“Naturally, these were the ones who were somewhat lacking in the practice of their duties, following up the clerics, spending time with them, being a model of religious life through their behaviour. Their activity, which was more or less underhand, caused disunity among the clerics and set them against their Rector. He continued to be the irreproachable model, but felt isolated and reluctantly tolerated by some of the groups who were dominated by these pseudo-educators.”<sup>20</sup>

### **The victory of the strong**

“Fr Versiglia understood what was going on, put up with it and kept silent” Fr Nigra continues. “None of us ever heard a single syllable, the least hint of complaint against those who were behind this disunity. I can testify that in my many private conversations with him, I had the opportunity to put my finger on this scourge. He always avoided the topic, never mentioned names, kept himself completely above these mean acts and did not lessen his politeness and courtesy in their regard.

“I maintain that on this sad occasion, Fr Versiglia’s manly virtue shone through. Had he wanted to make use of what we call prudence or human shrewdness, given his strong and energetic character and his ability, he could have won a victory in human terms in a somewhat delicate situation and have gloated over the dissidents. Fr Versiglia was completely the opposite: he aspired to the victory of the strong in the footsteps of Christ, the victory of virtue that would bear fruit later in the missionary and martyr.

“Keeping just to memories that concern me personally,” Fr Nigra concludes “I found in him the ideal confessor and father for me as I was beginning my very young apostolate. In my absolute confidence in him, I saw a hundred more proofs of the nobility and righteousness of his soul, which was entirely for the Lord, and led solely by a supernatural criterion. He brought his young subject to confide in this father and brother, and he edified and comforted him. And I also understood what a pity it was that his outward attitude, sometimes a little aloof and reserved, perhaps out of shyness, hid from others his gentleness, sensitivity and nobility of soul.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Fr Versiglia suffered and remained silent**

Another Salesian offers a concise and precise judgement on this sorrowful period. He was a teacher at Genzano and later spent many years working in the Congregation: “The dissent” he

<sup>20</sup> *Memorie di Don Lorenzo Nigra*, pp. 14–16, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.17.



writes “came from murmuring among the clerics. This caused disunity. Fr Versiglia suffered and kept quiet, and continued with his approach which certainly formed people to Salesian life far better than the would-be liberal approach.”<sup>22</sup>

The distress Fr Versiglia felt in that situation shows through ever so slightly, but clearly enough, in a letter to Fr Bianchi, dated 28 December 1899:

“My dear Fr Rector, how often, when thinking of those three years I spent at your side, I have begun to weep. Do not believe that I am already well-adapted to this life! I was working there, yes, but tranquilly and peacefully. You were my go-to for everything, all my worries, if indeed I had any; they would stay with me for half an hour at most. Instead now, who knows what I am doing?... The Lord knows: and He does not want me to go charging up more debts in His regard ...

“If I could just add a couple more little concerns, I say little, because if they were indeed really serious ones I would have already bashed my head against a wall; if I can add, I say, a few little concerns – I find myself almost constantly bewildered. How often, if it were up to me, have I wanted to be at your side again, happy to serve the Lord in humble roles.

“When I was ordained a priest, among the other graces I asked of the Lord was this one: to be able to do so much work for him, but in hidden fashion. Did the Lord hear me? Worse than that – he could not reach me! Sometimes I also complain to you that he did not let me go to Patagonia ...

“As the years go by I find that my life becomes ever more difficult. This year we can add to that the loss of our beloved Fr Cagliero.<sup>23</sup> What a loss that has been for us! ... For us he was a friend, father, Providence. It is true that the Lord has compensated abundantly with someone else who is as good to us as he was and maybe even more. Nevertheless my heart is wounded, and even now needs some outlet.”<sup>24</sup>

## The 1900 Jubilee Year

On 11 May 1899, Pope Leo XIII promulgated a Holy Year for the year to come, 1900, Jubilee of the Holy Year. He recommended consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus by way of preparation, to take place across the world on Sunday 11 June 1899, with a formula prepared by the Pope himself.

On this day the Pope, every bishop in his diocese and every parish priest in his parish, consecrated the whole world to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Fr Rua asked every Salesian to unite himself to that solemn event, making his own act of consecration. He also thought of a collective act by the entire Congregation.

Fr Andrea Beltrami, the apostle of devotion to the Sacred Heart, was finishing writing up the life of then Blessed Margaret Mary Alcoque. He wrote the wording for the Salesian Congregation to be officially consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Accepting it, Fr Rua established that the act of consecration take place in all Salesian houses in a solemn function to be held at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>

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22 *Memorie di Don Abbondio Giraudi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

23 Fr Cesare Cagliero died 1st November 1899. From 1887 he was the Provincial of the Roman province and Procurator of the Salesian Congregation at the Holy See. Leo XIII, in an audience granted Fr Rua three months after the death of Fr Cagliero, praised him for his work. He was succeeded in both offices by Fr Giovanni Marengo, who in 1909 was elected Bishop of Massa Carrara and in 1917 Apostolic Internuncio for the Central American Republics. He died in Turin in 1921.

24 *Lettere a Don Eugenio Bianchi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, in other words on the night of 31 December 1900. The Pope granted the faculty that Mass could be celebrated at midnight, as he had the previous year.<sup>25</sup>

### **Devotion to the Sacred Heart at Foglizzo and Genzano**

Fr Rua also recommended intensifying devotion to the Sacred Heart by celebrating the feast with the greatest solemnity, and by holding a special ceremony every first Friday of the month when people would make a Communion of reparation, and there would be other particular practices.

In the novitiate at Foglizzo, devotion to the Sacred Heart, especially given the push from Fr Beltrami, had become a deeply rooted and much loved practice. Fr Versiglia brought it to Genzano in all its details, where the feast of the Sacred Heart was celebrated with the greatest solemnity.

We have the testimony of a cleric who was attending the Gregorian University at the time. He had fallen seriously ill. After his recovery, Fr Versiglia, spontaneously and without any request on his part, invited him to convalesce at Genzano.

“I recall the wonderful impression that letter made on me” he writes. During the holidays there they celebrated the feast of the Sacred Heart at Genzano in a truly extraordinary way. Neither before nor since have I seen a feast of the Sacred Heart celebrated with so much enthusiasm, abundance and wealth of preparation. There was a truly exquisite musical and literary academy which has left indelible memories. Then in the evening, an absolutely extraordinary illumination (festival of lights).

“The architectural design of the novitiate building, which the bricklayers had only half finished was completed with a huge scaffolding, and it was all lit up Venetian style.<sup>26</sup> They had worked on it during recreations for a fortnight. Fr Versiglia not only directed the work but did the work of three himself. I understood over those days how strong was love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus among those clerics.”<sup>27</sup>

“It was inevitable that such fervent piety would not be too pleasing to the would-be liberals we have spoken of earlier. But that school year we are speaking of, 1900–1901, the atmosphere had already changed. “The scene had become more tranquil and serene,” concludes Fr Abbondio Giraudi.<sup>28</sup>

### **The kind of activity not found everywhere, and fatherly kindness**

Fr Giovanni Faccaaro, a wonderful soul, speaks to us about this rejuvenated atmosphere and the passing from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He began teaching at Genzano, and this subsequently became the daily bread of this excellent teacher and exemplary priest.

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25 Cf. *Annali*, III, pp. 92-99. The circular with which Fr Rua asked every Salesian house to make its consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, was 21 November 1900. The consecration was fixed for the night of 31 December 1900, when the 19<sup>th</sup> century passed on to the 20<sup>th</sup>.

26 Fr Versiglia was a specialist in this, we could say, during his three years of assistance and teaching at Foglizzo. Fr Lorenzo Nigra has left us a vivid recollection of this in his memoirs.

27 *Memorie di Don Carlo Simona*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

28 *Memorie di Don Abbondio Giraudi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

“I was in the Salesian house at Genzano for exactly a year, from 8 October 1900 to 8 October 1901,” he writes “when Fr Versiglia was the Rector. I recall that year vividly, since it was the first year of practical life for me after the studentate of philosophy at Valsalice. It made a particular impact on me. Fr Versiglia was Rector of an Institute with a novitiate and studentate of philosophy, and a very flourishing festive oratory attached.

“Right from the outset of being there I noticed in him immediately the kind of activity not found everywhere and a fatherly kindness which I experienced throughout the year.

“There were only two priests in the house that year: the Rector, Fr Versiglia, and the Prefect. It really was edifying, especially on Sundays, to see the good Rector involved in confessions from morning to evening for the boys in the oratory, and in preaching. He did all this himself, explaining the Gospel in the morning, then in the afternoon providing the Sunday instruction. By evening he certainly had to feel very tired, but he was always cheerful.

“He was unfailingly punctual and regular and it was admirable. Always the first to be there for the practice of piety, he gave good example to the whole community. He was always smiling and jovial. While demanding that we fulfil our duties, he was still able to put up with the sacrifices that he had to be subjected to daily with a healthy sense of humour.”

### **Consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the beginning of the 20th century**

“I recall with special and real emotion the enthusiastic preparation he involved us in for the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the night that divided the two centuries, chosen by Fr Rua for consecration of all houses of the Salesian Congregation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we were gathered in the Institute’s chapel dedicated to St John the Apostle. We felt all the inner joy that one feels on the holy night of Christmas.

“I would have liked to have been under his leadership for many years to come, but obedience called me back to Turin again, after just one year spent at Genzano.”<sup>29</sup>

This was the last year that the novitiate and philosophy course were together in the same house. In October 1901, the studentate of philosophy was transferred elsewhere and Genzano remained just a novitiate. So what Fr Versiglia had called the “simple years” returned.

### **A difficult change for the Salesian Congregation**

A decree from the Holy Office dated 24 April 1901, forbade the Superiors from hearing the confessions of their subjects and the pupils. Fr Rua communicated this to the entire Congregation on 6 July, adding a line expressing absolute and immediate submission to the Pope: “This comes to us from the Pope and thus from God” he wrote. We must thank God that he has enlightened us so much through the supreme Superiors.”<sup>30</sup>

On 5 October 1901, Fr Versiglia wrote to Fr Barberis: “I would like to ask that a decision be soon made regarding this novitiate; and that either a Rector or a confessor be sent here as soon as possible. things are not going well for confessions. I cannot hear confessions because there is no

<sup>29</sup> *Memorie di Don Giovanni Faccaro*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>30</sup> *Annali*, III, pp. 188–189.

one to take my place as Rector. Other Salesians do not come and I am forced to turn to the Cappuchins.”<sup>31</sup>

The Superiors, convinced of the great importance of a confessor in the formation of the novices, preferred that another Rector be chosen, leaving the role of confessor and master of novices to Fr Versiglia. That was how it went for 1902 and 1903, and for the two following years 1904 and 1905, another suitable confessor was found for the house of formation and Fr Versiglia resumed his role as Rector and novice master.

“When he left his role as Rector,” writes a novice from the 1902 year “to carry out simply the role of novice master, we saw no change in his behaviour. He was deferential in all matters towards the Rector, and educated the novices to the change of leadership by his own courteous obedience, using his habitual motto frequently: *In nomine Domini.*”

### **He was the soul of recreations and loved as a father**

“Whether as both Rector and novice master or simply as novice master,” the same cleric goes on to say “Fr Versiglia was the soul of recreations. I came from the seminary and was not accustomed to this way of doing things, and was astonished at seeing him run like a hare and play like a boy. However, when the bell signalled the end of recreation, you saw a radical change in him. The game finished and he went beneath the portico where, surrounded by most of the clerics, they walked and talked happily and in a lively manner, as if he did not feel at all tired after the game.”<sup>32</sup>

“Everyone loved him like a father” writes a novice from the following year, 1903 “and not only the novices, but all the confreres of the house. He was always cheerful, despite his ascetic looks. He wanted recreations to be lively. He played with us and did not care about the inevitable issues that would arise during a game. He was always calm and conciliatory. In the first few months I was tormented by malaria and spent days in bed. Fr Versiglia consoled me, encouraged me, so much so that I regained peace and resignation. He wanted us to sing and be happy, often telling us: ‘Debts and melancholy – out of my house’ and his other line was ‘*Laetari et bene facere; e lasciar cantar le passere*’ (Be happy and do good and let the sparrows sing).

“He demanded that everything be orderly and that everyone do his duty. But we needed no further urging. It was enough for him to say something for everyone to promptly obey, so well like was he.

“He was always with us at the practices of piety, edifying us by his composure and educating us to Salesian life by his example. His conferences were short, well-prepared, full of teachings. He warned us against the difficulties of Salesian life and pointed to ways to overcome them. He studied each one’s character and before sending us out to our field of work gave each some advice, made recommendations suitable in each case ... On 21 October 1903, a few days before leaving Genzano, I noted in my notebook the recommendation given me on the final evening I went walking with him in our spiritual group: it was perfect for me and was then very useful in my practical life with the young.”<sup>33</sup>

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31 *Lettere a Don Giulio Barberis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

32 *Memorie di Don Alfonso Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers

33 *Memorie di Don Antonio Usai*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers

## **An ideal novice master for his piety and gentle fraternal approach**

Another novice from the same year, 1903, apologised for not remembering particular episodes, but said that he could say with absolute certainty that he had found in Fr Versiglia “the ideal novice master for his piety and his gentle fraternal approach when conversing, advising, and leading.”<sup>34</sup>

Fr Sante Garelli too, whose memoirs we have already drawn from, said in his deposition to the ecclesiastical court in Turin for Bishop Versiglia’s beatification process: “For us novices he was always a master and model of piety, religious observance, mortification and great meekness.”<sup>35</sup>

This was the judgement of his pupils. The Superiors thought no differently. At a meeting of the Provincial Chapter, one of the members wanted to table the question of Fr Versiglia’s canonical age, since he had been chosen as Rector and novice master at the age of 23 and even now as only 30.<sup>36</sup>

The Provincial, Fr Giovanni Marengo, Procurator at the Holy See, and later, bishop, with tears in his eyes, begged those present not to raise this question. The Provincial’s emotion and the unanimous disapproval of the others regarding this individual’s question, well knowing that holiness and wisdom are not measured by years, showed just how much respect there was for the young novice master, not only from his pupils but also the Salesians who lived Don Bosco’s spirit.<sup>37</sup>

## **The lasting memory of the people of Genzano**

We have not yet given sufficient indication of Fr Versiglia as Rector and leader of the festive oratory at Genzano.

Testimony to the success of this oratory comes from the vivid memories he left among the people of Genzano.

In 1910, Fr Luigi Terrone was transferred from the house at Schio to Genzano: “I can bear witness” he writes, “to the fact that Fr Versiglia’s memory was still alive and dear to the people. I heard the most wonderful eulogies from all kinds of people about his charity, his activity and especially his zeal for the youngsters at the festive oratory. He was still remembered affectionately by the archpriest, canons, the Jacobini family, the Pagliaroli sisters, Doctor Francavilla and many others.”<sup>38</sup>

Fr Eugenio Cera was sent as Rector to Genzano in 1922. At the time he was the historian of the Congregation: “I recall” he writes “still hearing Fr Versiglia spoken of with great praise for his apostolic zeal at the festive oratory. In fact the merit goes to him for having made it such a fruitful source of good that has been maintained still.”<sup>39</sup>

Fr Carlo Braga, missionary in China with Fr Versiglia until 1919, came to Italy in 1929 for the Beatification of Don Bosco: “The memory of Fr Versiglia was so dear and deep for the people of

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34 *Memorie di Don Domenico Giannantonio*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

35 *Summ.*, p. 381.

36 The canonical norms established 35 years of age as the minimum for being a novice master. In Fr Versiglia’s case a dispensation had certainly been requested, as also for his priestly ordination at twenty two and a half years of age-.

37 Cf. *Memorie di Don Rinaldi Augusto*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

38 *Memorie di Don Luigi Terrone*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

39 *Memorie di Don Eugenio Ceria*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

Genzano” he writes “that when I found myself there in 1930 for a conference on the missions in the Salesian theatre, as soon as a picture of Bishop Versiglia appeared on the screen, there was an outbreak of applause, especially from his former oratorians who had remained very much attached to him.”<sup>40</sup>

Fr Versiglia himself kept up an uninterrupted correspondence with his former oratorians. On the two occasions he came to Italy he felt the need to return to Genzano and was welcomed with enthusiasm. He collected generous offerings for his Mission.

### **If Fr Conelli won't go, I will**

To introduce my comments on the new role conferred on Fr Versiglia, the Mission in China which he had so desired and longed for, I will recall two episodes relating to it.

The first is from 1901.

“Fr Versiglia gladly spoke about the missions” Fr Abbondio Giraudi writes. He was a cleric at the time teaching at Genzano. “But no one yet thought he would go to China. I found myself one day among a group of cleric during recreation. They were talking about the missions in China and one of Don Bosco’s dreams about these missions. It was said that Fr Arturo Conelli would be the leader. Fr Versiglia, who was passing near the group, stopped to listen. When a number of opinions were offered during the conversation, Fr Versiglia, smiling, blurted out: “Well then, if Fr Conelli won’t go, I will.” There was laughter ... and Fr Versiglia left the group.”<sup>41</sup>

The second was from 1905, probably the last month Fr Versiglia spent with the novices at Genzano.

“During the recreation at afternoon tea time, Fr Versiglia was talking in a group” Fr Antonio Graziani writes. “I was passing by. Standing somewhat away from the group, Fr Versiglia asked me facetiously: ‘Tonio, when are you going to China?’ The question surprised me ... and I smiled uncertainly. I was intrigued. A companion who heard this came to my aid: ‘Ask him when he is going ...’ Fr Versiglia smiled and changed the topic. Not many days afterwards we saw him studying Portuguese.”<sup>42</sup>

### **The orphanage at Macao is entrusted to the Salesians. Offer made to Fr Conelli**

In October 1902, Fr Giovanni Marengo left his role of leadership of the Roman Province to focus solely on the office of Procurator General of the Congregation at the Holy See. Fr Arturo Conelli was called to replace him. As we have seen, he was Rector at the Salesian Institute at Frascati from 1898.

For more than five years the Bishop of Macao (first Bishop Giuseppe Emanuele de Carvalho, then Bishop Giovanni Paolina de Azevedo) had been in negotiation with Fr Rua for the Salesians to take up the leadership and management of an orphanage in Macao which belonged to the bishop. In

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<sup>40</sup> *Summ.* p. 151.

<sup>41</sup> *Memorie di Don Abbondio Giraudi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>42</sup> *Memorie di Don Antonio Graziani*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers. Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

the summer of 1905 the negotiations had come to an end and the Major Superiors were considering the choice of personnel to send on this first expedition to China.

The natural head of the expedition would have been Fr Conelli, whom Salesian tradition maintained had been pre-selected by Don Bosco and who had also been very much involved in the negotiations.<sup>43</sup>

The letter sent by the Superiors to Fr Conelli at Provincial headquarters in Rome was forwarded to Frascati, where he was staying as the welcome guest of the Rector, Fr Lodovico Costa – the one who has given us this information – for a period of rest and recuperation following some serious intestinal problems he had been suffering from for several months, and which were preventing him from attending to his duties as Provincial. The doctor looking after him, Prof. Seghetti, had said that the case was a serious one, and in Roman dialect had added: “*Questo è un macello!*” (What a mess this is!).

Fr Conelli was also 41 years of age: learning new languages and adapting to a completely different climate presented some serious unknown risks.

Following Fr Costa’s report word for word: “Fr Conelli felt it was his duty to let the Superiors know about his problems; and he received the reply that they would accept his judgement but that he think about finding a confrere who could replace him and be up to the task.”

### **Here I am, I am ready! Send me**

“The replacement was soon made. Fr Conelli advised Fr Versiglia, Rector and novice master in nearby Genzano, that he wanted to talk to him.

“The following morning Fr Versiglia was at Frascati. After a brief discussion with the Provincial he left for Genzano again, thanking him and asking for blessings and prayers that he might correspond less unworthily to the kindness and trust of the Superiors.”

We have reproduced the brief description given by Fr Costa word for word, to emphasise the obedient, simple and humble figure of Fr Versiglia. But we also know that this was a great day for him: the Lord had heard his ardent desire, one nourished for many years in the depths of his heart, and prepared for by the daily exercise of the virtues needed for a good missionary. The great ideal for which he had become a Salesian and a priest was beginning to be realised.<sup>44</sup>

Fr Costa finishes his account with a brief comment: “Admiring the promptness and generosity with which Fr Versiglia responded to the appeal, one confrere exclaimed: ‘How good and admirable is this surge of youthful enthusiasm. Here I am, I am ready. Send me!’”<sup>45</sup>

Some other confreres, joking, said that the prophecy of the Foglizzo tradition regarding Fr Conelli had come true: he had indeed gone as a missionary Macao, but in Rome. This was actually

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43 An extensive and detailed documentation on the preliminaries and negotiations has been published in *Dom Bosco e a China, Contributo para a Historia dos Salesianos*, pelo Padre Carlos Antonio Kirschner, S.D.B., Macau 1970, pp. 89-151 as well as in: M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico sull’Opera Salesiana in Cina*, a cyclostyled edition, Aberdeen Technical School, Hong-kong 1973, pp. 11-33.

44 The official communication of this important role by the Salesian Superior Chapter was given to Fr Versiglia by the General Councillor for Schools, Fr Francesco Cerruti, in a brief letter dated 21 August 1905, couched in very familiar and witty terms, reported by M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico sull’Opera Salesiana in Cina*, cyclostyled edition Part I, Hong-kong 1973, pp. 34-35.

45 *Memorie di Don Lodovico Costa*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

the name of the district in Rome at the time where the Salesian Institute of the Sacred Heart had been built, and where the Provincial house in Rome was.

Fr Versiglia returned to Genzano full of wonderful thoughts and began to study Portuguese as we have indicated above.

### **In Portugal and England. Expert in five languages**

He went to Portugal and England for some months to learn two languages.

“His application was so intense and regular” Fr Carlo Braga writes “that he did not allow himself, nor did he wish to visit the artistic wonders and monuments of the area where he was a guest.”

He then adds; “Fearing some problems from the family in taking up his missionary vocation, he spent just a few days in his home town before departure, and only told his family of his destination from the ship when it was already a week at sea.”<sup>46</sup>

As for languages, other than Italian Fr Versiglia was able to speak Chinese, English and French. In 1922 when he came to Italy for the Salesian General Chapter, he gave a series of conferences in France as well, speaking in French. In 1926–27 he spent three months in the United States and Canada: he gave retreats, sermons and conferences in English and French.

One missionary confrere in the group that arrived in Hong Kong on 28 September 1919, wrote in his diary:

“In addition to the grandeur of the port and the many curiosities in this setting which is so different from what we had left behind in Italy, three things have remained so clearly impressed on my mind of my arrival in China. The first is the warmth of Fr Versiglia when he came to embrace us even before we had disembarked: we felt the heart of a father. The second is the great respect Fr Versiglia had from among religious and the clergy we visited. The third is the great ease with which he switched from Italian to English, Portuguese, Chinese and French according to the situation we encountered in the colourful world of Hong Kong.

“He truly had the gifts of a leader and the heart of a father.”<sup>47</sup>

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46 *Summ.* pp. 151 and 260.

47 *Memorie di Don Stefano Bosio*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.



## THE ORPHANAGE IN MACAO

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1906–1910

“Lacking a place in the dining hall,” Fr Versiglia notes in the already mentioned letter to Fr Rua, “we were placed alone in an adjacent magnificent small dining area. In the mornings it was transformed into a chapel.”<sup>1</sup>

“I would even dare say that there would be few little chapels as clean as ours” Fr Fergnani wrote in his diary. “What a comfort it was, in the peacefulness of the morning, to hold in our hands, in the consecrated host, He who created the heavens and spread the immense surface of the waters over the earth!”<sup>2</sup>

### **Stopover at Naples. Fr Conelli the bearer of a message from the Pope**

The following day, Friday 19 January, the ship called into Naples. Fr Arturo Conelli, Provincial of the Roman Province, came on board to greet the missionaries. He brought a message from Pope Pius X. A portrait of the Holy Father signed “To our beloved son Fr Luigi Versiglia and his equally beloved companions of the Pious Salesian Society, with the earnest wish that their apostolate in China be crowned by great success, we impart our apostolic blessing with all our heart. From the Vatican, 17 January 1906.”<sup>3</sup>

In his second letter from on board, dated 19 January, Fr Versiglia writes to the Rector Major, Fr Rua: “We have already been very much moved for having celebrated for the first time on the open seas, blessing the Lord for deigning that we should do so. The almost unexpected though affectionately promised visit of dear Fr Conelli, bearer of a precious handwritten message from the Holy Father, brought more than one tear to our eyes. I can assure you that I was beside myself with consolation.”<sup>4</sup>

### **On Chinese soil. Hong Kong and Macao**

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> G. Fergnani, *La prima spedizione Salesiana in Cina*, Milan 1929, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1906, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1906, p. 83.

On 13 February 1906, after 26 days at sea, the first Salesians set foot on Chinese soil. At 10 a.m. they disembarked in Hong Kong and by 5 p.m. were in Macao. Fr Versiglia wrote to Fr Rua the same evening:

“With hearts overflowing with gratitude to our good God, I give you the happy news of our arrival. The voyage was better than we could have wished. We experienced the Lord’s loving providence in a special way. No mishaps, nothing forgotten, no inconvenience, everything perfect. Despite our ship arriving in Hong Kong five days earlier than expected we found the Bishop’s secretary waiting for us in port along with the good Canon Suarez, and they looked after everything without the slightest embarrassment to us.

“In Macao the Dean of the Canons and the Vicar General were waiting for us. The Jesuit Superior and a number of Jesuits welcomed us warmly, as much as if they were welcoming their own confreres. His Excellency the Bishop, unable to meet us because of the rain, was waiting for us in what will be our house near the Seminary, and welcomed us with fatherly kindness. He immediately brought us to our little chapel and blessed us there in the name of the Immaculate Virgin to whom he has dedicated this house destined to take in Chinese orphans or abandoned children.<sup>5</sup>

“Since there were still a few days to go for final preparations of our house we were lodged with the Jesuit Fathers who were full of care for us ... We rested for two or three days then take possession of our house which is a rather nice place and adequate for now.”<sup>6</sup>

### **We have begun! Chinese is a serious difficulty**

Two months later, on 2 April 1906, Fr Fergnani wrote enthusiastically to Fr Rua in the name of Fr Versiglia:

“We have begun!”<sup>7</sup>

In fact the small house of the Salesians of Don Bosco had opened its doors to around thirty orphaned or poor Chinese children.

And the language? A Chinese cleric from the Seminary acted as interpreter for the Salesians and a teacher for the boys.

“And then,” Fr Fergnani continues “love has its own secret and mysterious language where there is no need of words. Our boys come to us, endlessly chirping away like old friends. They have so much to tell us. With the same confidence and assuredness we answer in Italian and sometimes even in Piedmontese! ...”<sup>8</sup>

That was Fr Fergnani writing, full of optimism and imagination ... But in fact Chinese was a serious difficulty. “As for the spoken language,” Fr Versiglia writes in the life of his mission companion, Fr Olive, “I saw that among our confreres, those who had the ability to apply themselves seriously, especially with a good method and a good guide, managed to get out of

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<sup>5</sup> In 1904, deciding on the opening of this house, Bishop Giovanni Paolina de Azevedo wanted it to be called the Immaculate Conception Orphanage in memory of the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma.

<sup>6</sup> *Boll. Sal* April 1906, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. MB, XIV. p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Boll. Sal.* July 1906, pp. 210–212.

difficulty with three months of study ... After a year they could manage it without fear ... But for us newcomers, with no guide suitable for us, language study was a real problem.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The festive oratory. First feast day of the Help of Christians and the first baptism**

On 6 May 1906, Fr Versiglia wrote to Fr Rua, explaining that there were 34 Chinese orphans, and that they had begun to learn trades like tailoring, boot-making and book-binding, despite the extreme lack of suitable tools for these. He then gave some consoling news and offered it as a gift for Fr Rua’s name day, Saint Michael: “Yesterday, the first Sunday in May, to the orphanage for Chinese boys we added a festive oratory for Portuguese boys and natives of Macao who spoke Portuguese.”<sup>10</sup>

A month later, on 8 June, Fr Versiglia announced that there were 37 young orphans who had celebrated Our Lady’s month with due piety, singing hymns to Our Lady, and that on the feast day of Mary Help of Christians they sang the *Missa de Angelis* in Gregorian chant and Latin.

It was a success resulting from Fr Fergnani’s good will and patience. Knowing only a few words of Chinese himself, he had succeeded in getting a good group of Chinese youngsters to commit words and melodies to memory that were completely new to them, and their thin little voices had a surprising and moving effect. In the afternoon, Jesuit Fr Antonio Roliz, a teacher at the Seminary, gave the first homily on Mary Help of Christians in Chinese. It was a truly historic day for the incipient Salesian Work. The Diocesan Bulletin gave an extensive account of the feast.<sup>11</sup>

“But the most beautiful gift of all given us by Our Lady on her feast day” Fr Versiglia goes on to say in his report to Fr Rua “was the baptism of a 14-year-old young orphan, and the reception of another two abandoned children, who turned up crying at the door of our house. Does it not seem to you, beloved Father,” he concludes “that this feast is a good omen for us and for China?”<sup>12</sup>

### **Fifty orphans. Nineteen first communions**

In November of the same year, 1906, the Diocesan Bulletin spoke of the orphanage once again and the success of Salesian work:

“Sunday 14 October saw the celebration of nineteen First Communions in the chapel at the Immaculate Conception Orphanage. The Bishop celebrated the Mass and distributed Communion.

“He was charmed by the devotion with which these little Chinese youngsters approached the Lord’s table. All the pupils at the orphanage had been prepared with three days of retreat, preached by Father Roliz from the Seminary ...

“The orphanage has grown to fifty boys. God continues to protect such a beautiful and promising institution.”<sup>13</sup>

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9 L. Versiglia, *Un Missionario Salesiano in Cina*, Turin 1922, pp. 13–15.

10 *Boll. Sal.* August 1906, pp. 242–243.

11 The article is reported in A. Kirschner, *Dom Bosco e a China*, pp. 182–183; cf. also M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 39.

12 *Boll. Sal.* September 1906, pp. 276–278.

13 For the complete text of the article see A. Kirschner, *op. cit.*, pp. 183–184.

In passing on to Fr Rua the article in the Macao Church Bulletin, Fr Versiglia expresses the joy of the confreres working with him. Don Bosco's educational approach showed its real validity, including among Chinese boys.<sup>14</sup>

The Bishop of Macao too, in a letter to Fr Rua on 16 November 1906, just two weeks after Fr Versiglia had sent the report we have just mentioned, expressed his complete satisfaction: "Our orphanage" he wrote "is winning the respect of the public, increasing to the extent that it will become much better known. Very much contributing to this will be the band which will very soon perform in public."<sup>15</sup>

The band, which Bishop Paolino had so much wanted, soon became a reality and brought honour not only in Macao, but in 1909 was also invited to Canton, capital of southern China, where the young musicians were admired, and contributed to making the new work admired and appreciated.<sup>16</sup>

### **First visit from a Salesian Superior**

In March 1910, Fr Pietro Cogliolo, Provincial in Portugal, which the house in Macao belonged to, visited the first Salesians in China.

The embrace from Fr Versiglia, who had come to meet him in Hong Kong, was, in his words, "cause for real emotion."<sup>17</sup> The welcome from religious authorities in Macao showed just how much esteem the Salesians were held in after four years of work.

In a letter to Fr Rua, Fr Cogliolo summed up the Salesian work in Macao in his dignified and understated style.

"The Salesian Work in China" he writes "has been going for just four years; But it has done much in this brief time. The confreres, especially the priests, had immediately seen the need to study Chinese and it is consoling to see how they have benefited from it. By now they can hear confessions and also preach in this language, something that is often not so easy to achieve even after many years.

"Our pupils, all of them Chinese, are keen, intelligent and affectionate toward their Superiors; and in general their piety is edifying. There are four workshops: tailoring, boot-making, printing and book-binding. Their European-style band is much appreciated and is often invited to perform, including by non-Christian groups in towns and cities near Macao.

"It is high time" he concludes "that this work, begun so lovingly by the Bishop of Macao, be given a more stable and suitable location<sup>18</sup> and that we see to the possibility of opening a field of work for the zeal of future missionaries."<sup>19</sup>

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14 *Boll. Sal.* January 1907, pp. 13–14.

15 The complete text of the letter in A. Kirschner, *Dom Bosco e a China*, pp. 218–221.

16 *Boll. Sal.* March 1912, pp. 76–77.

17 Cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 40.

18 *Boll. Sal.* June 1910, p. 186.

19 Already in the letter of 16 November 1906 quoted earlier, Bishop Paolino wrote: "What concerns me most is to find a house in good condition to transfer the orphanage to, large enough, with everything needed for educational purposes ..." The house was found and the Salesians entered it on 1st September 1910, just when the Portuguese Revolution was imminent, and forced them to leave Macao. Cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 42.

## **A work with no breathing space or future options**

The Provincial, Fr Cogliolo's, final sentence reveals the real situation of the house in Macao and points to the aspirations of the Salesian confreres. Ten years later, in 1919, when writing up the life of his working companion in China, Fr Lodovico Olive, Fr Versiglia spoke of that situation and the aspirations.

“The first part of our journey was to Macao. Here we began our work by opening an orphanage and a school of arts and trades. But the first five years spent there, we could say, were years of sacrifice and pain and I would almost say of disappointment.”

After talking about the difficulties of the language, which we have mentioned above, he goes on to say: “Another serious difficulty was the absolute lack, over a long period, of grand ideals and options and no hope of expansion. We were locked into a work with thirty pupils in a small house which was inconvenient both for the pupils and the superiors, not even having a courtyard, and without any hope of being able to develop the work. The writer was very often on the brink of losing courage. But Fr Olive was at my side, and it was enough to talk with him to feel rejuvenated. The events in Portugal in 1910 opened new paths; because having to temporarily abandon the work of the orphanage in Macao, a territory under Portuguese control, we began the work of the Mission in the district of Heung-shan.”<sup>20</sup>

## **The Portuguese Revolution. A heart-rending separation. Exile in Hong Kong**

Revolution broke out in Portugal in 1910. The decree by the Government in Lisbon on 8 October, suppressing Religious Orders, was also published in the Colony of Macao on 19 November.

“From the outset of the political turmoil in Portugal,” Fr Versiglia writes a year later on 13 December 1911 “we were greatly concerned. The hope was, though, that given the need for our work and the good will we had encountered among the population and local authorities, we would have been spared. This was the actual and explicit intention of the authorities. But unfortunately the power of a group of rebels prevailed, and on the evening of 29 November 1910, at 9 p.m. we received the order to get ready to leave Macao that same night. Our poor boys! Although well forewarned they did not expect this news just the same. It was a truly heart-rending scene when I had to make the sad announcement after evening prayers. We were in the chapel: most of them broke into tears. When I had given them our final farewell, encouraging them to remain good, none of them wanted to leave the chapel, but they spontaneously all asked to go to confession. When confessions were over, many wanted to still stay and pray and only some hours later did they all go back to the dormitory; but most of them kept vigil all night, sobbing.

“Meanwhile, we prepared our things as best we could. At four in the morning of 30 November 1910 everyone was back in the chapel again. We celebrated Mass and all went to Holy Communion and prayed with such fervour that it brought tears to our eyes as they asked for the grace of soon being reunited again in a new place.

“We went to various ferry stations with those who were able to reach some relative or other, and we gave those who really had nowhere to go to the Seminary to look after. After midday we left too,

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<sup>20</sup> *Boll. Sal.* June 1910, p. 187.

for Hong Kong, where we were welcomed with great loving kindness by the Vicar Apostolic Bishop Domenico Pozzoni and by the good Fathers of the Mission [aka Vincentians] from Calogero in Milan.”

### **Proposals for new foundations**

“Providence wanted to immediately console us with proposals for new foundations” Fr Versiglia goes on to write. One society of prominent Chinese offered to transport the entire institute near to Canton. The Prefect Apostolic of Canton, Bishop Merel, also suggested we open an institute of arts and trade in that city. Other suggestions came to us from the Archbishop of Manila and the Bishop of Lipa in the Philippines. Invitations also came from northern Ho-nan and other regions in China.

“But what attracted us” he concludes “was the hope of being able to go to a mission properly speaking. In fact the Bishop of Macao who had called us to China, said he did not want to be deprived of our work, and since he could not have us in his city, he entrusted a Mission to us that was dependent on him, the district of Heung-shan.”<sup>21</sup>

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21 L. Versiglia, *Un Missionario Salesiano in Cina*, Turin 1922, pp. 11–13. On the lack of horizons and management problems, as well as development of the orphanage which belonged to the Portuguese bishop, Fr Versiglia had provided a detailed report to the Salesian Superiors in Turin in a letter dated 22 November 1908 addressed to Fr Cerruti and preserved in the Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

## THE MISSION AT HEUNG SHAN

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1911–1918

### Heung-shan, home district of Sun Yat Sen<sup>1</sup>

Heung-shan is part of southern Kwang-tung. It is located south of Canton and north of Macao. It is the region where Sun Yat Sen, Father of the Chinese Republic, was born, and from whom it has recently taken its name. The region comprises the vast *delta of the Pearl River (Chu Kong)*.<sup>2</sup> The intricate network of this river's tributaries, at one point makes the region look like an agglomeration of islands, and forms the transportation network which puts it in communication with Canton to the north, and on the other side with the China Sea. On the southern and western side the region is bordered by many small and large islands. Sea, rivers and trails were the means of communication the missionary could use at that time.

In terms of the Church, Heung-shan depended on the Bishop of Macao who had sent some priests there. At the time there were around three hundred Catholics in a population of more than a million.

“Everything has to be done,” Fr Versiglia would write two months later to the Salesian Provincial, Fr Cogliolo: “prepare catechists, teachers, schools. We hope that whoever comes after us will find paths opened.”<sup>3</sup>

It was uncultivated land, but a really good field of missionary work. It was what the Salesians who were exiled from Macao wanted. The Bishop committed himself to supporting the Mission financially, as he had done for the orphanage in Macao.

Politically, the region entrusted to the Salesians belonged to China.

Here is how Fr Versiglia ended his letter to Fr Albera, on 4 May 1911 from Hong Kong, explaining the conditions imposed by the Bishop of Macao:

“Meanwhile we have a foot in China, and in a mission which is very comfortable in material terms whatever happens next with the Portuguese mission; since we are already in place it seems to me we can adjust more easily and succeed in staying there.”<sup>4</sup>

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1 On the Salesian Mission at Heung-shan cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 45–55.

2 Chu (pron: Ciü, French) = *pearl*; Kong (Cantonese), Kiang (Mandarin) = *river*. The village where Sun Yat Sen was born is called Tseui Heung-tsun. According to Chinese custom, Sun Yat Sen changed the name he had since childhood, Yat Sen, into Chung Shan. The region where he was born, Heung Shan, took its name Chung Shan from him.

3 *Lettera a don Pietro Cogliolo*, 14 July 1911, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, vers.

4 *Lettere a don Paolo Albera*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.; *Annali IV*, 375; the text of the agreement with the Bishop of Macao in M. Rassiga, *Breve Cenno storico*, pp. 43–44.

## **The small Salesian community is reformed**

The Salesians remained exiled in Hong-kong for five months, from the end of November 1910 to the beginning of May 1911. Of the small group at Macao, only Fr Versiglia and Fr Olive remained, exercising their priestly ministry in the cathedral in Hong-kong. But according to the agreement made with the Bishop of Macao, the Salesian Superiors in Turin were committed to immediately sending to other priests, who arrived in Hong-kong on 5 November 1911: Fr Vincenzo Bernardini and Fr Giovanni Pedrazzini. “The first of May,” Fr Versiglia writes in the previously mentioned letter to Fr Albera “I went to rent a house in the Heung-shan district, at Heung-chow<sup>5</sup> to begin our mission ... Next Monday, 8 May, God willing, we will take possession of it.”<sup>6</sup>

## **The beginning of the new mission**

Here is how Fr Versiglia recounts the beginnings, in a report to Fr Albera published by the *Bollettino Salesiano*.

“On the morning of 8 May 1911, we affectionately farewelled the Italian Fathers of the Mission in Hong-kong, who had put us up so charitably during our exile. They were deeply moved; and we more than them. Some wanted to come aboard with us, and they all followed us with more affectionate good wishes. Coincidentally, the ferry we were on was the same one that had brought us from Macao to Hong-kong six months earlier.

“The journey went without the least incident and towards evening we arrived at our last port of call.

“We were filled with great enthusiasm and trusted fully in the Lord’s providence; just the same I have to confess that there was a degree of anxiety.

“The residence was a long way from where we disembarked and we knew no one. We also knew that there was a law in force in those parts forbidding foreign missionaries. But Providence guided us and our anxiety soon disappeared.”<sup>7</sup>

## **The attachment of past pupils from Macao**

“Our ferry had not yet docked when we noticed a group of people waiting for us, and two of them who were waving their arms happily. They were two of our past pupils from Macao. They had found out, by chance, about our arrival and had come to the port not only to greet us but with the intention of staying with us for a while to help us in the early days of our residence in that area which we knew nothing about. The others who had come for our arrival were just curious, but with the best of intentions.

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5 It was a new port with a huge market, also called San-fau. The Chinese built it to avoid the port at Macao, under the Portuguese. It is situated in a magnificent bay, with a great beach, about three hours journey from Macao. It saw rapid development. A consortium built wharves and storage facilities there, shops sprang up and a regular ferry service with Hong Kong began. A major financial collapse of the consortium ended the rapid development of the commercial side of the port, which fell into disuse.

6 *Lettere a don Paolo Albera*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

7 Throughout the 19th century there were many persecutions of European missionaries in China. Among the most bloody were the Boxers in 1900. Before the revolution brought down the Manchu Dynasty, although abolished by various international treaties, they were sometimes applied out of ill will by the Courts or by individual Mandarins. See H. McAleavy, *Storia della Cina Moderna*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Milan 1971, pp. 209 ff.



“Word had spread that two teachers were coming, one for English the other German, and that they would be opening a school for languages and physics, a large boot-making workshop and also a band!”

### **The imagination of simple souls**

“Our pupils had spoken about what was done in Macao and they imagined that we were going to do the same thing there. So instead of being opposed to us many came to show their respect for us. “Indeed some wanted to carry our luggage and others accompanied us all the way to our house.

“There were so many questions we were plied with during the trip. Some asked to see the last for making shoes, others the leather: others wanted to know how much it cost to make a pair of shoes. Some asked if they could see the various musical instruments, the drum and cymbals; others asked us to teach them how to make soap, purify coal, make an electric system.

“In short, they thought we were wizards and knew just about everything. We let them speak, marvelling at their simplicity.

“Nor did the surprises end here. When we arrived at the city, one of the leaders met us to greet us in the name of all the citizens. And there were also fireworks let off as a sign of joy.

“These poor people imagined that we had come to the city to set up a factory for American shoes and that we were looking for land to set up a power plant and hoped that our factories and colleges would rejuvenate business which had been languishing for some time.

“And we hoped with all our heart that in time and with God’s help, we could truly cooperate in this hoped for flourishing of well-being.

“Once we had arrived at the residence the Bis which had given us excellent service for five years in the orphanage in Macao.

“Our two pupils had also prepared supper.

“So, having farewelled the people, we sat down at table and with our fine chopsticks, we did the good Chinese rice proud. Then each one retired to his room, thanking the Lord for imagining that we were back in our orphanage amidst our dear pupils.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Our little house collapses under the pelting rain**

“We were just in our new nest for a few days,” Fr Versiglia’s account for Fr Albera goes on “when torrential rain started and went on for some time; and what seemed to be a nice little house but in reality made of mud daubed with lime, did not take long in feeling the effects of water pouring through the roof and was very soon at risk of collapse ... In the middle of the night one internal wall, swollen with water, collapsed. I had just got out of my room, fumbling in the dark, when the wall my bed was against also fell down ... Everyone sprang out of bed ... terrified, but no one hurt ...

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<sup>8</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1912, pp. 76–78.

“When morning came, with the help of some other good folk we were able to exhume our household goods and carry them to a safer house nearby. From there for the whole day the following night, every now and again we heard the noise coming from the remaining walls of our house, as they fell one by one under the force of the wind and the pelting rain.

“Thus our residence lay in ruins, but at the same time we saw the visible providence of the Lord in the fact that everyone had escaped without injury. Recalling Don Bosco’s problems in his early building efforts, we considered that what happened to us was a good omen.

“For sure, the devil was not pleased that missionaries of Our Lord Jesus Christ had arrived in an area where he had reigned without opposition. The rain continued to fall for about a week, much to our discomfort, because we were forced to remain inside, while it would have been better for us to get an idea of the surrounding towns and villages.

“Finally, the bad weather came to an end and we began our explorations with the simple plan of getting to know the place, the roads, how many inhabitants there were and what they thought of us.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The residence at Ngan-hang**

“Once the first mission residence at Heung-chow was established,” Fr Versiglia writes “I left it up to Fr Olive to look after the Christians there and in the surrounding district, and I went to the residence at Ngan-hang, a village on the island of Lappa. The island is located in front of the port of Macao and can be reached in a quarter of an hour by boat. The Bishop of Macao had sent a missionary to Ngan-hang in earlier years and he had established a community of sixty or more Catholics there. Then it had remained without any missionary and the community had fallen apart. Some Catholics had gone to Hong-kong, Macao and Singapore. Around twenty had remained, like lost sheep without a shepherd, and wavering in their faith.

“Nevertheless,” Fr Versiglia continues “it did not take long to put them on the right path again. Soon we had re-established the practice of prayer in common, mornings and evenings, as they used to do. Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament flourished once more and now there is no lack of people who receive Communion every time they have a missionary.”

### **Six newly baptised become apostles**

“On the feast of the Immaculate this year, 1911, I had the consolation of baptising six adults, some of whom were the result of the prayers of others Catholics there.”<sup>10</sup>

Fr Versiglia knew how to make good lay apostles out of all six. Two, a husband and wife, properly instructed, became catechist, and a teacher at kindergarten, respectively. One fifty-year-old former Mandarin, who had fallen into poverty but was re-established through the charity of Fr Versiglia, rendered good service to the mission with the central authorities in the district, due to the prestige he had from his former occupation and was an active propagandist for the Catholic religion.

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<sup>9</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1912, pp. 78–79.

<sup>10</sup> *Boll. Sal.* June 1912, p. 178.

The other three newly baptised, who were moderately well instructed, were sent out to the surrounding small villages to catechise the simple folk.

In an earlier letter to Fr Albera, Fr Versiglia had highlighted the absolute need for male and female catechists, local teachers, since such intermediaries were essential in the mentality and attitude of the Chinese people. And now he was able to conclude with satisfaction: “The Lord has partly provided: the main positions have been taken up.”<sup>11</sup>

Two days after the baptisms, The Bishop of Macao came to impart Confirmation. The religious ceremony left a wonderful impression on everyone, ending with the distribution of gifts to poor Catholic families, catechumens and non-believers as well.

### **Zeal, sacrifice and humility**

Thus was the kingdom of God affirmed and thus did it grow, through the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the zeal of his servant, who continued to grow in the spirit of sacrifice and humility.

In the previously quoted letter of July 1911, to his Provincial, Fr Pietro Cogliolo, he wrote:

“The sixth year of my time as superior is about to finish.<sup>12</sup> After the magnificent results obtained (one house wrecked and half of the confreres chased away), the Superiors will think of someone else to guide the ship. I will be very happy to take up an oar, still in China, I mean, since I have no desire to return to Italy.”<sup>13</sup>

The “one house wrecked” in Macao was certainly not due to him, nor the authorities in Macao but, as he would say in a letter to Fr Emanuele Manassero, “to the unbridled arrogance of the troops who set out to expel all male and female religious.”<sup>14</sup>

As for the confreres, the humorous reference covers an unpleasant reality with the mantle of charity and humility. We can glimpse it in the letter just mentioned to Fr Manassero, written nine months later. After having spoken of his two young Coadjutor Brothers who had already returned home because they were not suited, he adds: “The Lord knows the troubles and mortifications we have to put up with in the house and beyond.” Fr Fergnani, too, had to leave the Mission because of poor health. This was the half of the confreres he had chased away!

In his habitual style, Fr Versiglia keeps his suffering to himself, and attributes any lack of success to his inability, redoubling his apostolic zeal with the greatest faith in God.

The Provincial, Fr Cogliolo, was a prominent individual and the Salesian Congregation and much esteemed by the Portuguese clergy in Macao. After joking about his lack of ability, Fr Versiglia closes the letter with a joking and courteous compliment to his Superior: “With the beginning of our Mission” he writes “you can look forward to a fine mitre: get your head ready and we will do the right things!”<sup>15</sup>

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11 *Boll. Sal.* June 1912, p. 181.

12 The mandate ended after the sixth year, according to the Rule.

13 *Lettere a don Pietro Cogliolo*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

14 *Lettera a don Emanuele Manassero*, 3 April 1912, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

15 *Lettere a don Pietro Cogliolo*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

## **The revolution at Shek-ki**

On 10 October 1911 the Chinese Revolution broke out, overthrowing the more than a thousand-year-old rule of the Heavenly Emperor and installing the Republic.<sup>16</sup> In Heung-shan too, there were skirmishes between revolutionary troops and the imperial forces. Fr Versiglia found himself in the middle of it all when, in the early months of 1912, he went to the capital of the region, Shek-ki, to ask for the protection of the Mandarin over a Christian community being harassed by a group of pagans, and to visit the small community in that city.

It was the first time he had gone there. When he arrived at the Mission house in the late evening, the catechist marvelled at the fact that he had risked coming in such tumultuous times. The revolutionary troops were about to mount an assault on the city; and taking advantage of the tumult everywhere, pirates too had become more daring and ruthless. The population, all afraid, had barricaded themselves in their houses. Traffic was paralysed.

The missionary's arrival was a great surprise and comfort for the small community of Christians. The morning after his arrival, they all attended Holy Mass and then gathered around him asking him to defend them.

"I comforted them," Fr Versiglia writes in a report to Fr Albera dated 24 June 1912 "and invited them to go and pray in the chapel. They immediately obeyed me: one of them intoned the Litany of the Saints and they all responded with deep devotion. I stayed on guard at the door, waiting for things to happen. It seemed to me that it wouldn't be all that bad."<sup>17</sup>

## **A military garrison that melted away like snow in the sun**

"In fact the revolutionary troops did arrive. The imperial forces put up no resistance but melted away like snow in the sun: some fled and some hastened to wear the revolutionary emblem, which was a white sash.

"The conquering troops entered the city in triumph, amongst applause and the firing of mortars. The revolutionaries limited themselves to demanding formal obeisance to the Revolution and cutting off the traditional pigtail. There was a mass cutting went on over those days, either voluntarily or by force.

"A picket of twenty soldiers came to guard Mission headquarters so that nobody would take advantage of the uprising to cause damage to things or individuals."<sup>18</sup>

"There were bloody skirmishes in the following days when the Governor of the Canton province sent his representative to take effective control of the city and replace the temporary revolutionary government. Officials and troops split into opposing factions and subjection to Canton's authority was achieved only through the spilling of blood."

## **Our Father was with us through all this danger**

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<sup>16</sup> On this topic cf. Ch. 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Bol. Sal.* November 1912, p. 335.

<sup>18</sup> The benevolence and respectful manner of the national revolutionary troops is clear, before they were 'bolshevised' by Soviet emissaries. This happened much later. Cf. Chapter 13, section entitled 'The nationalist Government ...'.

“Things being as described above,” Fr Versiglia concludes “the purpose of my going there, at least for then, was almost totally frustrated. There could be no thought of speaking about evangelization in those moments ... Nevertheless, my presence among the Christians did much good, both to give them courage and also to fly the flag.

“So then, our Father was there amidst the danger, putting his life on the line for us, followers of other religious sects were saying. Instead what did your ministers do? Not one was to be seen!

“This also left a very good impression on the pagans.”<sup>19</sup>

Fr Versiglia took advantage of the opportunity to gather the catechists, encourage them and plan work for them to carry out.

He also had the consolation of baptising two infants, bringing their father to repentance since he had in mind to sell them for gain. He succeeded in converting and baptising a thief on the brink of death. He had been fatally shot and left abandoned in a field.

“A thief in life and a thief at the point of death” Fr Versiglia comments, with his keen spirit of faith and habitual spiritual outlook – in life he had stolen what belonged to others; at the point of death he stole Paradise.”<sup>20</sup>

#### **Four new residences**

On 3 April 1912, in his first account to Fr Emanuele Manassero, Superior of the Subalpine Province which the Mission in China had been entrusted to after the Portuguese Revolution, Fr Versiglia wrote with obvious satisfaction:

“We already have four new residences: the first at Heung-chow, a new market also called San-fau, about three hour’s journey from Macao: here, however, both the house and the chapel are only rented. The second is at Ngan-hang on the island of Lappa just a quarter of an hour by boat from Macao: here the mission has a house, chapel and also its own land. The third is at Sheung-tchao on the island of Tao-moon, where Fr Olive has succeeded in building a chapel and a house for the missionary. The fourth is at Shek-ki, the capital of Heung-shan, where there is a community of some sixty Christians.”<sup>21</sup>

#### **Three friends catch up again. The basis of humility**

Fr Emanuele Manassero had spent two years as Rector at Foglizzo (1897–1899), then at Oswiecim in Poland (1899–1905). In 1905 he had been elected Provincial of Austria (1905–1911), and in 1911 of the Subalpine Province in Turin.

When beginning the account mentioned above, Fr Versiglia thanked him for the interest he had shown, along with members of the Provincial Council, among whom Fr Alessio Barberis. The three friends from the Gregorian had caught up again. But Fr Manassero was the Superior. With his usual humility and spirit of faith Fr Versiglia addressed him formally with the title “*Lei*”: “I am certain,”

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<sup>19</sup> *Boll. Sal.* November 1912, p. 337.

<sup>20</sup> *Boll. Sal.* November 1912, p. 338.

<sup>21</sup> *Lettere a don Emanuele Manassero*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

he writes “that You have found good support in good Fr Alessio and I, too, thank the Lord for it. Instead I regret that for my part, all You can expect is annoyance and trouble.”

Offering a brief and essential overview of Salesian personnel with him, he begins thus: “I will not speak of my nothingness, which everyone recognizes.”

Along with his apostolic zeal and self-sacrifice, Fr Versiglia continued to strengthen the foundations of humility, which Saint Augustine says is the basis of every great and solid building.

### **With the people afflicted by the plague in the poor hospital at Wan-chai**

Revolution and civil war had swept through Heung-shan, leaving a trail of sorrow in its wake: lack of security, fear, misery. In many places the poor were left without defence and arrogance ruled. Pirates mercilessly plundered rich and poor alike. Business was paralysed and work was uncertain and scarce. Hunger reigned just about everywhere.

“It seems that this part of China is going through a rough quarter of an hour” Fr Versiglia writes to Fr Albera on 24 March 1913.<sup>22</sup> In some districts, the terrible scourge of bubonic plague was added to destitution and hunger.

It was during this time that Fr Versiglia and his confreres showed what Christian charity and apostolic zeal could achieve. From Ngan-hang, on Lappa island, Fr Versiglia made apostolic trips into the surrounding areas. Toward the end of 1912, while returning from one of these he was met by a Christian who asked him:

“Did you go to Wan-chai? There are many people struck down by plague there.”

Fr Versiglia went there immediately: it was an hour’s journey.<sup>23</sup>

The “hospital” was a large bamboo shed covered with leaves and surrounded by mats. The floor was a trellis of woven reeds half a metre above the ground. The “rooms” were separated by rush mats. There was not a hint of hygiene. Food consisted of a few sweet potatoes and a piece of boiled pumpkin, hardly enough even for someone healthy. The patients lay on bare tables, wrapped in filthy blankets, whether they were infected or not. When someone died, that place was taken by someone else without the least effort to disinfect or clean. Patients were tied to their pallet with a chain around their feet so they would not escape while delirious.

“Father,” the catechist accompanying Fr Versiglia said “this is a place where the plague victims can die without causing their family any problem or expense.”<sup>24</sup>

### **A twelve year old girl**

The first time Fr Versiglia entered the place he found himself facing a girl around twelve years of age, laid out on a poor pallet, the pallor of death on her face and blood dripping from her mouth. Crouched on the ground, her father watched her, petrified.

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<sup>22</sup> *Boll. Sal.* May 1913, p. 148.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

Fr Versiglia bent over the poor girl and spoke to her at length, instructed her briefly on the truths of the faith, and seeing her keen desire for baptism, administered it.

“So, am I a child of God now?” the girl asked. And in a rush of tenderness she looked for Fr Versiglia’s hand, brought it to her mouth and kissed it, leaving the imprint of blood which stained her lips on it. Then, pointing timidly to the chain around one foot she asked:

“This will not prevent me from going to God?”

“No, stay calm” Fr Versiglia replied. And she slipped a coin into the hand of a nurse, who hastened to untie the girl.

A few moments later, she breathed her last, free in body and soul and flew to God.

“That first day there were a dozen or so whom I was able to administer baptism to and they all went on to a better life” Fr Versiglia writes in his report to Fr Albera. “After four days the number of baptised was around thirty.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Face covered with buboes**

“On the fourth day I ran across a farmer who was around forty years of age” Fr Versiglia continued. The plague buboes were so large they covered his whole face, while fever raged in him and he was being suffocated by the wheezing gasps of his final agony. Yet his mind was perfectly lucid.” Fr Versiglia spoke to him kindly and explained the main truths of the faith to him.

“The poor man, despite his terrible state” Fr Versiglia went on “was engrossed, like someone hearing wonderful and extraordinary news. ‘Do you believe what I have just told you?’ ‘I believe’ he said, gathering all his strength. ‘Do you want to be baptised and freed from all your sins?’ ‘I want to’ he replied, summoning another supreme effort, while his eyes were going dull and his face took on the pallor of death. I baptised him, and shortly after the man breathed his last, at the same time as he reached Grace and Heaven. I blessed the body and turning to the catechist who stood beside me, the good Wong Tciun, I saw that he too was wiping away a tear with the back of his hand.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Ninety four protectors in heaven**

“He had been a nurse for a long time in an English hospital and was a very useful guide for me in approaching and dealing with the sick. He was filled with charity toward them: he fixed up their bed, fed them with almost motherly tenderness. He had a perfect clinical eye for judging the seriousness of the illness and the imminence or otherwise of death.

“When I asked him if he was afraid of contracting the plague he answered:

‘Why should I be afraid? Are we not in God’s hands? I gladly come with you in this charitable role so that more people can be baptised and and we will have more protectors in heaven praying for us.’

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<sup>25</sup> *Boll. Sal.* May 1913, pp. 148–149.

<sup>26</sup> *Boll. Sal.* May 1913, p. 150.

“When we succeeded in baptising a good number, he went back home content and he always said: ‘Two, three, four, five ... protectors!’ And saying this he lifted his face (and the inseparable pipe he was smoking, but no longer opium) to heaven. He had been an opium smoker but his faith had cured him of that and made him an excellent catechist.”<sup>27</sup>

“The plague” Father Versiglia went on to say “was gradually abating in intensity, and having to go on to another Christian community, I was replaced by Fr Olive and the other confreres in the daily visits to the hospital. Their zeal did not fail to make good conquests. Once back home I took up my visits once more ... We continued visiting the hospital for several days. Then, doing my sums, I worked out that we had baptised ninety four.

‘Likewise protectors in heaven’ the good Wong Tciun commented, removing his pipe from his mouth, but just for an instant, and smiling contentedly.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Healed in body and soul**

“Did everyone die? The hospital had already been closed for a month when a well-dressed and well-presented young man presented himself at our Mission house, asking:

‘Is the Father here?’

“They called me and I came. The young man kissed my hand:

‘Father, do you recognise me?’

‘To be honest ... I don’t ...’

‘My name is Fok Cheong. I live in Macao. You baptised me in the hospital at Wan-chai, calling me John.’

“I consulted the baptismal register and found his name.

“Just then Fr Bernardini came in. The young man also kissed his hand and said:

‘The good God whom you let me know about, saved me from the plague. I have now come to thank you and to teach me how I can thank God for the twofold benefit I have received, of being healed and of having come to know him.’

“I gave him a catechism lesson for him to study and a brief letter of introduction for a good priest in Macao who could help him to be instructed in his religion and live a Christian life. He is now a good Christian.”<sup>29</sup>

### **A letter to Fr Albera**

I have here in front of me a handwritten letter Fr Versiglia sent Fr Albera during the plague we have described. It bears the date 25 May 1912. It is a beautiful summary of the situation and a clear testimony to the soul of an apostle.

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<sup>27</sup> *Boll. Sal.* June 1913, p. 179.

<sup>28</sup> *Boll. Sal.* June 1913, pp. 178–179.

<sup>29</sup> *Boll. Sal.* June 1913, 178–179.



“Very Reverend Father, I would like to write a long letter to you and give you a report on our poor efforts, but we are really at a moment when it would be difficult for me to find adequate time.

“A terrible bubonic plague has struck these parts and it is inexorable. Our job is to visit the Chinese hospitals where we find a good harvest.

“Many of these poor people, brought to the final moment and knowing they cannot escape, find it easy to open their hearts to the hope of a future life of happiness, and agree to be instructed sufficiently to be baptised. So we succeed, day after day, to send a good number to heaven.

“This news, while consoling your fatherly heart on the one hand, may cause you a certain apprehension on the other, for the risks we are taking ... But do not fear, beloved Father, because first of all we do take all the precautions suggested by prudence, and secondly, experience has already proven over many years that the plague does not easily attack Europeans. Thirdly, we go ahead trusting in the protection of Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco. We do not fail to recommend ourselves to them when we go to visit these plague victims, asking them to help us in our intentions and to preserve us from all evil.

“The purpose of this letter of mine, beloved Father, more than giving you news, was to offer you our filial congratulations for your name day. May the Lord fill you with his choicest blessings. May he make your efforts, and those of your sons, fruitful throughout the world, for the greater glory of God, and grant that all your sons may form a true crown of consolation and glory for their spirit of piety, work and sacrifice.

“Beloved Father, bless the least of your sons in distant China. We are yours in C.J.

“Saint Joseph’s Seminary, Macao, 25 May 2012.

Fr L. Versiglia”.<sup>30</sup>

## **On the leper island**

Earlier we pointed to the destitution and hunger afflicting some of the towns around Heung-shan, and the arrogance of pirates who spared neither rich nor poor. Below is another page from Fr Versiglia, a vivid description of the situations and moving testimony to his apostolic zeal. It is a report to the Rector Major, Fr Albera, unfortunately undated in the only source we can draw from; but it can be placed in the final quarter of 1913 and reflects events from that year.

“I have not yet told you that among the small Christian communities we minister to” writes Fr Versiglia “we have one on the island of Mong-chow, comprising twenty five or thirty poor lepers living in miserable straw huts. The condition of these unfortunate beings is such to make anyone pity them. They live in extreme poverty. Yet would you believe it? Even they are often the victims of pirates.

“I was in the residence at Ngan-hang (in Lappa island) when one morning I heard myself being called, for a long time in a loud voice. It was three of the lepers, weak from hunger and fatigue. With great effort, managing the oars with their stumps, they had managed to find a boat and get

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<sup>30</sup> *Lettere a don Paolo Albera*, Arch. Sal., 9, 3, Vers.

themselves across the sea where they dragged themselves to a point where they were sure to meet the missionary.

“These poor people told me that the night before, pirates had stripped them of everything they had and already for a day they had had no food, nor were they expecting the usual help from the State any time soon. The barbarous pillage had taken place just the day before.

“Taking pity on them, I gave them the few provisions we had, bought what I could in that spot, and local Catholics added some rice and salted fish, enough for them to go on for that day. Meanwhile I sent someone to alert the authorities and got them to anticipate their usual assistance.

“We go and see them each month to give them the opportunity to approach the holy sacraments. “The priest hears these poor soul’s confession standing under a leafy tree. Despite their ills, just the same they want to kneel on the ground, and devoutly receive absolution.

“Under another tree the good Chinese Canossian Sisters who go with us on these charitable visits, prepare the penitents for confession. One of them, in a kind shady track, prepares the altar for Holy Mass.”

### **The fervour of the early Christians**

“It all recalls the early times of the Church; and the fervour of these poor suffering people is certainly not so distant from that of the early Christians. One of the lepers acts as catechist and instructs the newcomers, so that every time we come among them we always have the consolation of administering some baptisms.

“My excursions from Ngan-hang began with a visit to these poor people. I went there with confreres Fr Bernardini and Fr Pedrazzini, and we had the good fortune to baptise six lepers who were sufficiently prepared. When we had completed our duties among the lepers I returned with Fr Bernardini to the residence at Nganhang. Since it was Saturday, we stayed there for the Sunday ceremonies, while Fr Pedrazzini returned immediately to his Mission.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Apostasy and unshakeable faith**

One of the spiritual misfortunes Fr Versiglia had to look after during his missionary excursions was the Christians who had apostasised.

“On visits made those days to San-fau (Heung-chow),” Fr Don Versiglia writes in the report previously mentioned from the last few months of 1913 “I often came across some Catholics who unfortunately had apostasised. It was usually a case of individuals who had returned from the Philippines, or America. They had embraced Christianity there, but with little conviction. When they had made some money they returned to their home country and also to their primitive idols. But there were exceptions.”

He goes on to talk about the case of a seventy-year-old man who had returned from Manila fifteen years earlier. His relatives were pagans and hostile toward Christianity. Recognising Fr Versiglia as a Catholic priest, he took him by the hand, led him into a separate room and on the wall

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<sup>31</sup> *Boll. Sal.* January 1914, p. 18.

at the back pointed to a little altar with a beautiful statue of Our Lady, before which a lamp burned constantly.

“Not a day has passed without me saying a prayer to our Blessed Mother” he said. He wanted to go to confession and did so with great devotion. “

When Fr Versiglia was at the point of leaving, the old man, full of commotion, and weeping, said:

“Father, thank you! The Lord has guided your steps. Come back and visit me so I can fulfil my religious duties. this will make my loneliness and abandonment less sorrowful,”<sup>32</sup>

### **How much did you pay?**

At San-fau, Fr Versiglia baptised the wife of a former Chinese official. She was at the point of death. He had met them some time earlier. Both had been very diligent in taking part in the instructions given by the missionary or catechist. She had studied religion deeply and gave hope that she would be a good teacher when she was baptised. When she suddenly found herself close to death she sent for Fr Versiglia, who had just left San-fau that day. He retraced the 20 kilometres immediately and reappeared, provoking amazement, especially among the pagans.

“Look how much attention he shows to his co-religionists” they said. Turning to the husband they asked:

“How much did you pay him?”

“Nothing” he replied. “Indeed, since the Father knows I am poor, he gives me alms from time to time!”

And the pagans’ eyes widened in disbelief.

Fr Versiglia baptised her.

In the convulsions brought on by her fever, the woman ordered her husband to take his sword and chase away the monsters standing around her bed. But then a young man, radiant, with wings appeared ... and the monsters fled; then a strange woman, radiant, appeared and once again the monsters fled, never to reappear.

“Was there something extraordinary in these visions?” noted Fr Versiglia. “It should not cause wonder because the devil has a lot of influence among the pagans, and the Lord’s hand also appears very clearly at times.”<sup>33</sup>

### **The orphanage band in Macao**

The celebration for the baptism of some catechumens, among whom the entire family of a boatman, gives us an opportunity to revisit and pick up once more the history of the orphanage in Macao which the Salesians and their young orphans had left behind on the morning of 30 November 1910.

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<sup>32</sup> *Boll. Sal.* January 1914, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> *Boll. Sal.* January 1914, pp. 20–21

“Christianity is not far from Macao”, Fr Versiglia writes in the report mentioned above; you can reach there in less than two hours by boat. So, to give greater emphasis to our celebration, we decided to take pupils from our orphanage there.

“I reached there the previous evening, to hear confessions and give a final hand to preparations. All the Christians were active ... we worked until midnight. Only then after saying our prayers in common, as usual, did we go to bed. Daybreak had not yet come and already a group of Christians, and some pagans were on the beach waiting for the arrival of the pupils from Macao ... ”

Fr Versiglia describes the wonder of those simple people seeing the bright young lads jump off the boat, elegantly dressed as little sailors, then fall into marching order, and the band then strike up with the trombones ... It aroused everyone’s enthusiasm and curiosity.

“Some, not content with seeing,” continues Fr Versiglia “wanted to touch the bass which our confrere Brother Viola was carrying over his shoulders.

‘It seems impossible,’ some said, ‘that by blowing into such a small hole, you can get such a loud sound.’ Some pagans murmured suspiciously:

‘These Europeans are truly devils!’

Others, seeing Fr Lucas conducting, noted:

‘That one must be smart to know how to bring all that noise together ... He must have at least ten devils ...’

“But what drew universal admiration more than anything else was the bass drum, hanging from the neck of our confrere, Brother Fantini. The drum and high hats are the *non plus ultra* of Chinese music ... “<sup>34</sup>

## THE NEW ORPHANAGE IN MACAO

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1912–1918

### The house “with sixteen columns”

It is 1913. We have noted that Fr Versiglia, who is always careful to highlight the work of his confreres, has named two coadjutors and one priest. If we add another priest, Fr Ignazio Canazei and coadjutor Brother Giuseppe Sturm, we have all the Salesian personnel who arrived in Macao on 6 December 1912, destined either for the Mission in Heung-shan, or the Orphanage in Macao.

Once the Portuguese revolutionary storm had passed, the Bishop of Macao wanted the Salesians to take up the running of the orphanage once more. Government authorities too were favourable, given the honour that a flourishing institute would give the Portuguese Colony in the eyes of the Chinese people. On the other hand, a recent decree by the Republican Government authorised foreign religious to stay in the Colony. Added to this was the well-based fear that the Government, knowing the building was empty, would requisition it to make it a military barracks. The bishop was ready to assist the Salesians financially.

As we have already said, Fr Bernadini and Fr Pedrazzini had arrived from Italy in November 1911.<sup>1</sup> On 14 September 1912, the orphanage re-opened and with great joy, most of the former peoples from two years earlier were seen to return. With new acceptances, the number reached around sixty, the same as it was before its closure.<sup>2</sup>

The very first Immaculate Conception Orphanage was a house next to the Seminary, too small for any development of the work as we had noted earlier. Shortly before their expulsion from Macao, the Bishop had assigned a larger and more suitable house for the Salesians, the one known as the “house of sixteen columns”.<sup>3</sup> The Canossian Sisters had lived there earlier, running a school for girls. As well as being larger, the house had the advantage of an extensive piece of land attached to it suitable for playgrounds and future buildings. It was in this house that the Salesians re-opened the orphanage in 1912. They had to do a lot of work to repair and modernise it and adapt it.<sup>4</sup>

Fr Versiglia and three priests were looking after the Orphanage and the Mission at Heung-shan at the same time.

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1 For the school year 1912–13, the list of confreres in the China Mission, attached to the Subalpine Province, with its only house in Macao, read as follows: Rector, Fr Luigi Versiglia; Confessor, Fr Lodovico Olive; Perpetually professed: Frs Vincenzo Bernardini, Ignazio Canazei, Gius. Lucas da Silva, Giovanni Pedrazzini and Coadjutor Luigi Viola, tailor. Triennially professed, Coadjutors Ottavio Fantini, shoemaker, and Giuseppe Sturm.

2 *Annali*, IV, p. 375. Cf. *Cronaca di Macao*, pp. 1–2.

3 Called this because it had a portico with 16 columns. It was later demolished and replaced by a new school building.

4 Cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 42 and 65–66.

In 1913 the number of pupils rose to 80 and in 1914 to 120.

Thus Mission and Orphanage developed side-by-side, working together to spread the kingdom of God. The Mission sent orphaned, abandoned or needy children there for instruction and a Christian upbringing. And the Orphanage sent them back to the Mission formed as good Christians and propagandists. Fr Versiglia and Fr Olive had already experienced this from their first missionary excursion on 8 May 1911, in an area completely unknown to them but which had two past pupils from the Orphanage in Macao. And they always had convincing proof of this.

### **“Father, take me with you to Macao!”**

In November 1913, in one of the residences to the north of Heung-shan, a poor catechumen with three young children presented herself to Fr Versiglia. She had been widowed a few years earlier. From her first marriage she had had one child, but having no wherewithal to live from, she remarried and had another two. The new husband had promised that he would also accept the child from the first marriage, but in fact it was not so. The child was then ten years old and lived like a stray, begging. Seeing Fr Versiglia, the poor lad grabbed him by the knees and begged him:

“Father, take me with you to the orphanage in Macao. It is true that I am a bad boy, but I will become a Christian and do better.” And he began to cry.

Fr Versiglia took him in, despite the orphanage being full to overflowing.

“Every time I go into the courtyard,” Fr Versiglia concludes “he comes running to me happily and asks: ‘Where have you been? What have you been doing?’ but unfailingly, he adds: ‘and when will you baptise me?’”<sup>5</sup>

Cases like these happened often. The sixty pupils at the orphanage in 1912, the eighty in 1913 and the hundred and twenty in 1914 had similar stories for the most part, and were the result of the charity of Fr Versiglia and his co-workers.

### **Families won over through the children**

“By preference, those among the pagans who are sent by the missionaries are accepted” writes Fr Versiglia in a report to Fr Albera dated 24 October 1914 “because they can be a means to make friends with the families. Won over by the good done for their children, they too end up becoming Christians. Last year, for example, we baptised 12 pupils and their families are studying the catechism, so they can be baptised in time. This year almost the same has happened ... What a harvest we could reap if we had the places and the means enough to take in many others who come along full of good will! Almost all the local authorities are very good to us, come along gladly to visit the institute and help us as much as they can.”<sup>6</sup>

### **The success of the pupils from Macao**

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<sup>5</sup> *Boll. Sal.* October 1914, pp. 303–304.

<sup>6</sup> *Boll. Sal.* December 1914, p. 366.

“The Chinese authorities too, are ever more deferential” Fr Versiglia goes on to say. “At Shek-ki, the capital of the Heung-shan district, we were received with every courtesy and honour by the Mandarin of the district, when we had an outing there.

“From the beginning he had shown himself to be a little unsure of our intentions, then seeing the open warmth we showed and how well educated and confident the pupils were, he ended up by being enthusiastic, and ordered an abundant repast for the pupils, and invited all the teaching staff to dine with him.”<sup>7</sup>

“It is always the band which arouses enthusiasm on our outings. It is already well-known and respected through almost all of Kwang-tung and is invited to many of the religious and civil celebrations around. It wins first prize in all competitions.

“Some time ago a school in the city of Chin-shan near Macao was celebrating its twenty fifth anniversary of its foundation. The celebration was perfectly organised, better than one could have wanted even in Europe. Our band played its part admirably, and was applauded endlessly by the most competent among the public.

“When the commemorative academy was over, there was a competition among gymnastics teams. Ours came first, and presented such a varied and exquisite routine performed to perfection, that it drew enthusiastic applause, so much so that it discouraged the teams that had to follow.”<sup>8</sup>

### **A wise educational rule**

Fr Versiglia follows up with an observation which is fully relevant today on the educational method to be used among peoples of a different civilisation than the missionary’s.

“Sometimes we want to force the Chinese” he writes “to think, want and act as we do, and we place them in a state of violent subjection from which they escape as soon as they can, renouncing even principles by association that they recognise as good. Instead, if they are educated and left free in their own setting, they correspond, and begin to like us.”<sup>9</sup>

Here Fr Versiglia recalls the grateful affection of the pupils from the first period of the orphanage, prior to the Portuguese Revolution and the exile that followed; he then speaks of the current period, quoting the real example of the “Rector’s feast day” that year, 1914. The feast was wanted, prepared in full freedom and spontaneously by a group of older boys, almost without the knowledge of the Superiors, but with the help and personal sacrifice of all the others; and everyone enjoyed it with true children’s hearts.<sup>10</sup>

There was nothing strange about such sensitive hearts of youngsters who had been educated by such a father’s heart. Life in the orphanage gave constant proof of that.

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<sup>7</sup> The outing to Shek-ki and Siu-lam lasted from 8-12 November 1913 and was made after the Bishop of Macao, Giovanni Paolino, carried out a pastoral visit to the two Missions entrusted to the Salesians, administering a number of Confirmations there (Cf. *Cronaca di Macao*, pp. 5–8).

<sup>8</sup> *Boll. Sal.* December 1914, p. 366. The *Cronaca di Macao* (House Chronicle, Macao) (p. 12) explains that the ceremony was held in March 1914 and that during the academy, Fr Versiglia also spoke in Chinese.

<sup>9</sup> *Boll. Sal.* December 1914, pp. 366–367.

<sup>10</sup> The *Cronaca di Macao* (p. 15) tells us that the feast was held on 21 June, Fr Versiglia’s name day. It describes the different religious ceremonies. supper in the courtyard which brought pupils and Superiors together, addresses read in various languages, and the gymnastic and musical performance which was most successful. The page ends saying that “all the work was done by the pupils who wanted to show their gratitude to the Rector and their joy.”

## **Christianity permeates the heart**

Six pupils were baptised on the feast of Mary Help of Christians in 1915: two were children of a large and outstanding family. Having fallen into poverty and destitution through a series of misfortunes and problems, the father had entrusted them to the orphanage. Charitable with everyone, Fr Versiglia had accepted them and they behaved in an exemplary manner. Despite not being accustomed to work, they adapted to learning a trade and applied themselves diligently to it, living easily with their classmates without the least indication of being superior to them. Although still pagans, they attended the practices of piety and wanted to be instructed in religion.

At the end of the year they asked to be baptised. It did not seem prudent to accept their request. Holidays at home with the family would have put the genuineness of their faith to the test.

In fact their family were practising pagans. The shrewdness of the two boys enabled them to avoid every idolatrous act for some time. Just at the right time they would disappear ... and reappear when things were over. But there was tension in the family over the two little rebels. When it came time for the family to pay homage to their ancestors, their father had them locked away in a room so they could not escape and just at the right moment called them for the ritual prostrations before the altar of the ancestor. He overcame the reluctance of the older boy by grabbing him by the arms and forcing him to his knees, while the young boy, nine years of age, fled to a corner of the room and shielded himself with his hands.

“So, you are contemptuous of my authority and the ancestors’ authority!” shouted the father.

“No father! You know I love you and that I pray to the Lord in heaven every day for you.”

“So why do you not worship the ancestors and wish to draw down curses on everybody?”

“No father; blessings and good luck depend on God who is in heaven. How can we hope for him to give them to us if we offend him?”

“Yet your brother who is at the college with you, has consented.”

“Father, he has not consented; or if he did so it was because he was forced to and will know how to repair this mistake. But I do not want to consent.”

Hearing the boy’s words the other brother also broke into tears, clearly revealing how they felt about things.

From that day onward their father no longer insisted on forcing the will of his two children. He himself recounted what had happened to Fr Versiglia and agreed to leave them free to make their choice.

Fr Versiglia made them wait another year before admitting them to baptism.

“Father, if I were to die what would happen to me without baptism?” asked the younger one.

“I would baptise you immediately. and if you were to die suddenly, your wish to be baptised would be enough.”

As the feast of Mary Help of Christians was approaching, when baptism was usually administered, the two brothers insisted that they finally be admitted.



“Your father and mother are fervent pagans” Fr Versiglia objected. “And if he gets angry with you would he abandon you?”

The two of them began to cry. Then the younger one said:

“Well then, Our Lady will help us,” and the older one added:

“In that case we will ask Fr Rector to always be our father.”

“Very much moved, I agreed” Fr Versiglia tells us.

“Prepare yourselves well,” he added “there is just a month to go; the Lord will hear your request. May Our Lady protect you.”

The two good boys went away bubbling with joy” Fr Versiglia concludes “and throughout the time of preparation it was edifying to see their fervour in fulfilling their duties, and their recollection during prayer. In the three days of retreat in preparation for the great rite, they behaved like two experts in spirituality.”

“When the day for their baptism and first communion arrived, this latter taking place the following day, the Solemnity of Mary Help of Christians you could clearly see that the Lord’s grace had swept over them. From 24 May until today (20 June) not a day goes by without them approaching the Eucharistic table ... and their behaviour is always in perfect harmony with the Grace of the Spirit who dwells in those two beautiful souls.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The scourge of selling off their daughters**

One of the moral scourges of the region evangelised by the Salesians was the sale of young girls to which some families were led either by superstition or destitution.

“Selling off their daughters is not a rare event in China,” Fr Versiglia writes on 24 June 1912. “and unfortunately, sometimes even Christian fathers do it, since without a deep-rooted faith they do not have the courage to resist need or desire for money.”<sup>12</sup>

He recounts the case of two sisters, one 12 and the other 15 years old, still catechumens, who were sold by Christian parents due to serious financial need. In cases like this there was no other way other than to redeem them by paying the fixed price. The two girls begged Fr Versiglia to take them out of their disastrous situation by redeeming them and then baptising them.

“May the Lord inspire some pious soul” Fr Versiglia added “to come to the aid of the missionary to rescue these and other poor souls from the devil.”

This request, published in the *Bollettino Salesiano* in November 1912, received a response with a telegraphed money order from France and two from Italy. Not just two but four of these poor girls were able to be rescued, and they were placed with the Canossian Sisters in Macao, where they received a good education and Christian upbringing.

The initiative continued over the following years. On 3 May 1916, Fr Versiglia wrote to the Rector Major, Fr Albera: “The work of redeeming young girls continues apace and we can say that

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<sup>11</sup> *Boll. Sal.*, April 1916, pp. 113–114. Cf. *Cronaca di Macao*, p. 24, which also records the names of the six who were baptised.

<sup>12</sup> *Boll. Sal.*, November 1912, p. 337.

a month does not go by when we do not succeed in making arrangements for some of these poor creatures abandoned to perdition either through misfortune or the wickedness of their parents.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Rector, missionary and architect**

In 1914, Fr Versiglia had six priests and five coadjutors with him<sup>14</sup> and could spread the work of the Mission and Orphanage between them while maintaining the strict and complementary relationship between Mission and Orphanage which we have pointed to as being so fruitful. The Heung-shan Mission was split into three zones assigned to Fr Pedrazzini, Fr Olive and Fr Canazei respectively. He kept the burden of looking after both Mission and Orphanage for himself: he continued to look after the Mission by making frequent visits, and he led the Orphanage like a father.<sup>15</sup>

Fr Giovanni Guarona, providing news on the Salesian work in China on 1st July, wrote: “Work in the Mission is very fruitful and constant progress is being made. This year there was prodigious development in the main centres and no lack of very consoling conversions. We now note very flattering movement among the Protestants, especially after the conversion of a Chinese pastor and a teacher, both now catechists in our Mission. Merit for this movement needs to be attributed to the zeal of the Vicar of the Mission, Fr Versiglia and missionaries Fr Olive and Fr Canazei.”<sup>16</sup>

In October 1915, since the old buildings at the Orphanage in Macao were no longer sufficient, Fr Versiglia, with financial help from a generous benefactor, personally began constructing a large three-storey building, with big dormitories, workshops, porticos and courtyards. New areas for printing, book-binding as well as a small commerce area were added to the tailoring and shoemaking workshops. In 1916 there were 130 pupils, in 1917 there were 140 and by 1919 the number had reached 200.<sup>17</sup>

### **A much sought-after spiritual director**

Superior and missionary at the Heung-shan Mission, Rector and father to orphans in Macao, Fr Versiglia also found time to dedicate to a delicate and valuable ministry of spiritual direction.

“He was a much sought-after spiritual director” attests Fr Guarona who was with Fr Versiglia from 1913 until 1930. “He never refused, even at the cost of real sacrifice, to go where he was called to priestly ministry. The faithful and religious communities still lament today that they are unable to take advantage of his ministry.”<sup>18</sup>

“For many years he was spiritual director of the clergy in Macao and of the Canossian Sisters” Fr Braga says. “He exercised the ministry of confessions to the great benefit of his penitents, who

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13 *Boll. Sal.*, August 1916, p. 244.

14 To the confreres named above in note 1 on page 111, were added, on 3 December 1913, Fr Guarona Giovanni and Coadjutors Brother Del Corno Giuseppe, binder, Brother Guglielmina Vincenzo, printer.

15 Cf. *Annali IV*, pp. 378–380.

16 *Boll. Sal.*, December 1915, p. 372.

17 Letter of Fr Versiglia to Fr Calogero Gusmano, on 4 October 1919, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers. On developments at the Oratory in Macao: Anonymous, ed. Salesian Missions, *L'Orfanotrofio di Macao e la Missione dei Heung-shan in Cina*, Monografia, SEI, Turin, 1925, pp. 3–16; M. Rassaiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 65–68. The contract with the builder for the new orphanage was signed on 1st September 2015. Work began 1st October. The contract committed the builder to finishing work within four months. (Cf. *Cronaca di Macao*, p. 28).

18 *Summ.* p. 177.

lament the loss of his spiritual direction. One could say that his confessional was the most frequented by people of every kind.”<sup>19</sup>

“I found myself in Macao for a few years (from 1903), when the Salesians arrived there” writes Cardinal José Da Costa Nunes, who succeeded Bishop Paolina de Azevedo in the Macao episcopate. Fr Versiglia was their Superior. I was closely involved with him and had a special respect and admiration for him because of his extraordinary human and priestly qualities. He was my usual confessor ... I knew him very well and was a friend of his in difficulties and triumphs. I saw the mustard seed he had sown on arrival in Macao 1906, grow and develop to huge proportions. Animated by a superior spirit, with a clear view of problems concerning him, gifted with a healthy balanced outlook, always ready to welcome those who asked for advice and assistance, strict with himself and warm towards others, masking the deep piety that still shone through his soul which was completely immersed in God, Fr Versiglia had an extraordinary effect on Macao ... The chapel at his institute was a centre of piety which contributed much to increasing the fervour and religious sentiments of the Catholic public ... When he knew he would be leaving Macao because he was elected as Superior of the Salesian Mission at Kwang-tung, the city was very sad at hearing the news, as if such a choice would be creating a gap that was very hard to fill ... Every time he returned to Macao, Catholics in the city ran to visit him, and they were very happy when they saw him elevated to the dignity of the episcopate.”<sup>20</sup>

### **The sources of every apostolate**

Fr Versiglia’s zeal drew abundantly from the sources of every apostolate: prayer, holiness of life, recourse to the prayers of good people, especially innocent children.

Already on 12 July 1908, writing to the Rector of the Salesian Oratory at Valdocco, Fr Secondo Marchisio, he was suggesting he foster among the boys some groups of an “apostolate of innocence”, that is, groups of good boys who would offer the missionaries their fervent Communion, Masses devoutly heard, good works, and would keep in union of prayer with them.

“It seems to me that such a noble apostolate could be a very strong encouragement to piety” he wrote. “The sensitive heart of our youngsters and their enthusiasm for doing good could make them, even at their tender age, little missionaries in their own right, capable of converting many poor pagans with their prayers. And we are certain that the Lord, as a reward, will encourage a few more vocations among them.”<sup>21</sup>

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19 *Summ.* p. 262.

20 *Summ. resp. add.*, pp. 81, 78, 82.

21 *Boll. Sal.* April 1915; handwritten version of letter in Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

## FIRST JOURNEY BACK TO ITALY

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### A Salesian mission

#### A completely Salesian mission

The Heung-shan Mission gave good results in conversions and baptisms, offered no financial problems because it was subsidised by the Bishop of Macao, but was precarious by nature and did not fit in with Don Bosco's grand dreams on the future of his sons in China.

The Bishop, who was Portuguese in a Portuguese colony, could at any moment revoke the concession and give the mission to other religious who were Portuguese. Instead the Salesians were hoping for a fully autonomous and completely Salesian mission.

This issue had often arisen in correspondence between Fr Versiglia and the Superiors in Turin. Fr Versiglia had offered suggestions dictated by much prudence and a deep knowledge of the situation, and he had also offered concrete proposals.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, realisation of these did not depend on Macao or Turin, but on the Holy See.

#### First journey back to Italy

Fr Versiglia thought he would be able to take the matter in hand when he came to Italy for the 12th General Chapter supposed to take place in 1916. But the Major Superiors had decided to anticipate the Chapter to 1915 so it would coincide with the centenary of Don Bosco's birth and avoid the inconvenience and extra expense of confreres from around the world coming together on two successive occasions. Then the war in Europe had forced the cancellation of all plans. No General Chapter was held while Fr Albera was Rector Major.

Fr Versiglia decided to tackle the journey just the same, and given the war raging in Europe, that was by no means an easy thing. The maritime services were limited and precarious. Ships for Europe generally went around Africa: they departed and arrived when and if they could. Fr Versiglia left Macao on 3 May 1916 and arrived in Turin on 27 June.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Lettere a Don Calogero Gusmano*, 9 December 1913 and 17 September 1914, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers. Particularly interesting comments on the matter are found in the *Memorie di Don Emanuele Manassero* (p. 12), who was at the time Provincial of the Subalpine Province, on whom the China Mission depended, and who was interested in it.

<sup>2</sup> The *Cronaca dell'Orfanotrofio di Macao* (House Chronicle of the Macao Orphanage) notes on 3 May 1916 (p. 34): "Departure of the Rector, Fr Versiglia for Italy. At 2 p.m., at the ferry departure wharf were missionaries from Heung-shan, the Superiors and pupils of the college, some priests from the Seminary and friends of Fr Versiglia's. When the ship began to move the college band played a

## Works God wanted guided from on high

In the first meeting which Fr Versiglia had in Turin, one could only but see the subtle yet continuous hand from on high guiding works which God wanted.

Bishop John Cagliero, the first great Salesian missionary, had been appointed Cardinal in the consistory held on 6 December 1915, by Pope Benedict XV.<sup>3</sup> He arrived in Turin just a year later, for the Feast of Mary Help of Christians.<sup>4</sup> When Fr Versiglia arrived in Turin the Cardinal was at Valdocco.

Fr Versiglia found his great friend, schoolmate at the Oratory, then at the Gregorian, and now his Provincial, Fr Manassero, there to meet him at the station.

“Fr Versiglia arrived in Turin on 27 June 1916” writes Fr Manassero in his carefully kept diary. “The same evening I accompanied him to Valdocco.”

In his first chat with the Cardinal, the latter assured Fr Versiglia that he would support him, also because he recalled and only now understood the proper significance of Don Bosco’s words when he told him at the time of the first expedition to America: “You look after these missions and Asia too.”<sup>5</sup>

## An explanation that waited thirty years

If the project which Fr Versiglia presented to be sponsored by the Holy See provided the Cardinal with an explanation he had waited thirty years for, his reply to Fr Versiglia was the assurance that the project he had cherished and nurtured for four years had been in Don Bosco’s thoughts.<sup>6</sup>

The Cardinal enjoyed the greatest respect in Rome as a great missionary pioneer. One of his conferences on Patagonia which he gave in the capital in the presence of five cardinals, many bishops and other prelates, had aroused great interest. The Pope had read a report of it, and the first time Cardinal Cagliero had an audience with him, he had asked for further information on the matter and often asked him to look for it; indeed, the Cardinal hoped that he would be the

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farewell march.”

3 Cf. *Annali*, IV, pp. 94–98.

4 Cf. *Annali*, IV, 101–102.

5 *Memorie di Don Emanuele Manassero*, p. 13; Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

6 Two years later, and precisely on 6 June 1918, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, Cardinal Cagliero himself, while giving the farewell address to the first group of missionaries leaving for the new Mission in China, explained the reference to Fr Versiglia: “At the end of 1887” he said “I was returning from Patagonia to Turin to receive a final greeting from and hear the Venerable Don Bosco’s final words. Our good Father, when he saw me, wept tenderly. The last time he spoke to me, it was 28 January 1888, three days before he died, he said to me:

“Come closer.”

“Don Bosco, I am here.”

“I recommend the Missions to you ...”

“Yes” I replied, our dear Missions in America!”

Don Bosco: “I recommend Asia to you!”

“But I have dedicated myself to the West” How can I go to the East?”

And Don Bosco calmly replied:

“I recommend Asia to you!”

These words seemed strange to me and I did not understand them. So much so that they were not entered into the diary of the Venerable’s final illness, only because at the time they seemed improbable. But thirty years later they have become a reality.” (*Boll. Sal.* June–July 1918, p. 106.).

“spokesman” for some causes of Beatification, because that way he would have been obliged to go to him more often.<sup>7</sup>

The Cardinal was also a member of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, on which the missions depended.

With a protector such as this at the Holy See, and the precedent of Don Bosco’s thinking on the matter, Fr Versiglia’s plans could only but be successful, as we will see in due course.

At any rate, Fr Versiglia did his part both in Rome and elsewhere. He also convinced the Superiors to send on the documentation to obtain permission from the Italian Government for a group of Salesians to be exonerated from bearing arms. They then left for the new mission in China.

### **A conquest for the China mission**

One of these was Fr Carlo Braga, who had come from the war front to Turin on leave when Fr Versiglia was about to depart on his return to China: “I was impressed by the energy, courteous manners and the enthusiasm of Fr Versiglia for the Salesian Work in China. Having asked him many questions and insights about the Chinese people, about the difficulties of understanding them, both because of the language and their temperament, he refuted them all and knew how to prepare me in such a way that I offered to follow him when the Superiors would allow me.”<sup>8</sup>

From the *Memoirs* of Fr Manassero we have already cited, we know that Fr Versiglia, “other than looking around to collect donations for his Mission, preached two retreats, one to the aspirants at Valsalice (6-13 July) and one to the novices at Foglizzo (12-21 October), two houses he recalled especially fondly since it was from there that he had begun his spiritual journey toward the missionary apostolate.”<sup>9</sup>

### **An adventurous voyage**

The return journey had some adventure about it and also something of the supernatural that seems to accompany men of God in their undertakings. It lasted four months. Fr Versiglia left Turin on 25 January 1917, in the middle of the war in Europe. He embarked in Barcelona on 17 February and arrived in Macao on 24 May, the Feast of Mary Help of Christians, as he had so much wanted to. His arrival gave much joy to the Salesians and pupils at the orphanage, who all immediately went to the church to sing the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving.

“It was our duty,” Fr Versiglia comments in his report to Fr Don Albera, alluding naturally to the adventures on the voyage. They deserve to be recorded.

“When I arrived in Barcelona,” he writes in his report “all departures for the Far East had been suspended. Even waiting for who knows how long, was not a good prospect. The confreres there, well aware of my disappointment, sought to uplift my spirits in a kindly way, but my heart was in China, and quietly I prayed to Our Lady Help of Christians to open a way for me; I made a promise to spread devotion to her even more widely.

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<sup>7</sup> *Annali*, IV, pp. 99–100.

<sup>8</sup> *Summ.*, p. 146.

<sup>9</sup> *Memorie di Don Emanuele Manassero*, p. 14; Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

“And then, unexpectedly news came that the Shipping Company had decided to continue its voyages to the Far East, going around the Cape of Good Hope. A steamer that had delayed sailing for a month would be leaving the following day at 5 p.m.”

### **A promise to the Help of Christians**

“I had my luggage on the border with France, six hours away by train from Barcelona! It was almost physically impossible to get it in time ... It was then that I added the promise to buy a statue of Mary Help of Christians if I could arrive in time in Macao to have the procession there this year.

“Having made the promise, in less than no time things settled into place. In less than half an hour I obtained the signature from four Consuls on my passport and the ticket for the steamer. The luggage arrived exactly on time for departure.

“Our Lady had done her part admirably; now it was up to me to do mine: buy the statue.

“I asked our Technical School if they had a statue of the Help of Christians available.

‘No’ they answered. ‘We packed up the last of them a few days ago to send to America. Just the same we will go and see if it has been sent yet.’

“We found the box on the cart, ready to be taken to the port. It was sufficient to switch wharves: not the one at Buenos Ayres, but the one in the Philippines.

‘But I am certain it will be sent back’ said the forwarding carrier: goods have to be presented to the agency at least a day before departure.’

“He put many difficulties in the way of that item of luggage being accepted” Fr Versiglia comments. “But finally the ship’s captain agreed. a few minutes before the ship’s horn announced its departure, we saw our box hanging from a crane, swinging in the air, then slowly being lowered on the prow deck.

“The confreres who had very kindly and warmly accompanied me to the port were quite moved and said:

‘Our Lady really wants to go with you to Macao.’”

### **The visible protection of the Help of Christians**

“I must confess,” Fr Versiglia goes on to say “that during the three months aboard, I had not the least fear that something bad would happen, so certain was I of the protection of Mary Help of Christians.

“Our small steamer had to remain at least a good twenty two days at port at San Vincenzo in the Cape Verde Islands, one of the most desolate areas on earth ... It took that long for the captain of the ship to get the coal needed to continue the voyage.

“By now the passengers were resigned to turning back ... Over those days I got to know a Salesian Cooperator at Cadice, who was going to the Philippines and also carrying with him a statue of Mary Help of Christians.

‘Two statues destined to propagate devotion to the Help of Christians in China and the Philippines’ I exclaimed in wonder. ‘You will see that the Help of Christians will win out.’

“The day after, a telegram authorised the captain of the vessel to take in the coal he needed for the voyage to continue.

“We stopped at the Cape of Good Hope, and I had the consolation of spending a day with our good confreres there. In Singapore I had to take another ship. When we arrived there was one in port that was about to sail for Hong-kong. But the agency told me that all berths were taken.

‘One passenger who was booked, however, has not turned up yet’ they told me.

“There was just an hour to go. It struck eleven, departure time, and no one had appeared yet. I went aboard with my statue. The Help of Christians had seen to everything for me to arrive in Macao for her feast and for the procession in her honour.

“My emotion reached its peak, when, a month later, I learned that the ship which followed mine and that I would have had to take if I had not got so many things done in half an hour on 17 February, had sunk.

“Once again I knew that I owed my life to Mary Help of Christians and I promised once again to spend it for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Loved and respected**

The *House Chronicle of the Orphanage in Macao* (pp. 47-48) notes that two priests and three Salesian coadjutors went to Hong-kong to greet their Rector and father on his arrival from that lucky voyage and after an absence of a year and twenty one days. When the ship docked in Macao, all his boys were there with the band, a number of friends of the Salesian Work, and Church authorities: the Vicar General, Fr Giuseppe da Costa Nunes, future Bishop Macao and then Cardinal, the Dean of the Canons, the Bishop’s secretary, the Vice Rector and a number of teachers from the Seminary.

The humble son of Don Bosco felt that Our Lady had blessed his sacrifices and those of the confreres. The *House Chronicle* then went on to describe the feast of Mary Help of Christians “celebrated with greater solemnity than all the other years.”

### **At the dawning of perhaps the most important era**

Five months after his return from Italy, on 19 October 1917, Fr Versiglia, in a letter to Fr Gusmano, Secretary General of the Salesian Congregation, gave the Superiors in Turin news that cheered their hearts and opened hopes for a wider development of the Salesian Work in China.

Bishop Giovanni Battista De Guébriant, Vicar Apostolic of Canton, had organised a pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Francis Xavier for the 14th October, on the island of Sanciano (*Shang-chwan*). The Orphanage band in Macao had been invited to offer its services during the pilgrimage. With them went Fr Versiglia and Fr Guarona. During the forward journey by boat on the evening of 13

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<sup>10</sup> *Boll. Sal.* November 1917, pp. 289–290. In some parts the account is somewhat abbreviated: the last part is reported literally.



October, Fr Versiglia had a chat with Bishop De Guébriant. The latter confided in him that he had received a letter from the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith asking him to entrust one or two districts in his Vicariate to the Salesians, first under his jurisdiction and then to be given autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

Fr Versiglia writes: “I replied that it had always been Don Bosco’s keen desire that his sons take their missions to China and that today’s Superiors would be so happy to see their Father’s dream being realised. I also expressed my satisfaction that His Excellency would be the instrument of Providence to begin this work. However I also made him aware of the serious difficulty in finding the personnel that would be needed, given the current situation of the war in Europe.

‘Do not fear,’ the Bishop interrupted me. ‘We are carrying out an order from the Holy See. There is nothing to fear.’

“So then,” Fr Versiglia concludes “here we are at the dawning of perhaps the most important era for our Congregation in China. I am awaiting the call from the Bishop in Canton any day. I hope the Superiors will approve of this step which, on the other hand, is in agreement with what we have agreed upon. Since this came about during the pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Francis Xavier, it give me confidence that we are dealing with something arranged by, indeed a grace of, the Lord.”<sup>12</sup>

### **The Holy See’s wish**

Bishop Giovanni Battista de Guébriant from the Paris Foreign Missions, Vicar Apostolic of Canton, had in fact received a letter dated 21 July 2017 from Cardinal Domenico Serafini, Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. In it His eminence had shown his keen desire that one or two districts of his vast Vicariate be assigned to the Salesians, so that, he writes, “these good missionaries can begin their ministry, first under your jurisdiction and then autonomously, in order to set up a new Mission.” “Such an arrangement by Propaganda,” His Eminence noted “will not surprise your Lordship, who knows well the early plan of dividing this huge territory of Kwantung into three.”<sup>13</sup>

Bishop De Guébriant had gladly accepted the Holy See’s wish: “In general, I like it” he had told Fr Versiglia in the chat aboard the boat that took them to Sanciano. “It just needs some thought as to how to bring it about, and I need to talk to my confreres to get them used to the idea. Then I will send for you so we can look at early agreements.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The signing of the agreement for the new Mission at Shiu-chow**

On 21 December 1917, Fr Versiglia and Fr Olive went to Canton to conclude and sign the agreement with which the Vicar Apostolic of Canton would grant the Salesians eleven districts in the northern part of his Vicariate.

The transfer would be carried out in the following ways:

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11 The episode is told in plentiful detail by Fr Guarona himself in an article entitled “Sanciano, primi albori” in the memorial booklet for the Episcopal Consecration of the first Salesian Bishop in China, Macao 1921, pp. 21-25. Cf. *Cronaca di Macao*, p. 52.

12 *Lettere a don Calogero Gusmano*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

13 *Annali*, IV, p. 382.

14 *Lettere a Don Calogero Gusmano*, 19 October 1917, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

“1) By 1st March 1918 at the latest, the Salesian Society are committed to sending at least two or three missionaries to work in as many districts along with priests in the Vicariate, until they are sufficiently prepared to take their place. 2) The Salesian Society are committed to gradually increasing the number of missionaries, working in collaboration with priests in the Vicariate, so that by 1st January 1920 the substitution will be complete.”<sup>15</sup>

The Fathers of the Foreign Missions from Paris had chapels and residences in eight of the eleven districts in the province of Shiu-chow, but there were only five missionaries working there. Lack of missionary personnel was one of the reasons which had led Bishop De Guébriant to cede part of his vast Vicariate.

On 4 January 1918, sending the Rector Major, Fr Albera, the documents relating to the agreement made the previous 21 December, Fr Versiglia wrote: “You cannot imagine how great is the joy flooding the hearts of your sons in China. Our beloved Congregation is entering a new phase that must be important and glorious: the predictions of our beloved Father Don Bosco are beginning to be realised ... The contract is dated from the day of St Thomas the Apostle and during the Novena for Christmas. We have reason to hope that it is the Child Jesus himself who has sought to prepare the field of apostolate for us and in a way that we could never have believed possible.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For the complete text of the agreement see *Annali*, IV, pp. 382-283; *Boll. Sal.* January 1920, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Lettere a don Paolo Albera*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

## THE SALESIAN MISSION AT SHIU-CHOW

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1918–1920

### The Shiu-chow region

The territory covered by the *Shiu-chow Mission* includes the northern part of Kwang-tung province. It is wedged between Kwang-si province to the west, Hu-nan province to the north, and Kiang-si province to the east. It has a surface area of around 34,000 square kilometres, roughly the size of Piedmont, Valle d'Aosta and Liguria put together. In 1920 the population was around three million.

Predominantly a mountainous region, it is bordered on the north by a mountain range separating it from Hu-nan and Kiang-si. They do not exceed 2,000 metres in height. The *Pak-kong (Northern River)*<sup>1</sup> originates in the Hu-nan mountains, then, crossing the region from north to south, flows down to Canton.

One of the major tributaries flowing in from the east of the *Pak-kong* is the *Nam-yung River* coming from the border with Kiang-si, to the north of the region. Shiu-chow rises at the confluence of these two rivers, and is the capital of the region, located in the north central part.

On the southern border of the region the *Pak-kong* has the *Siu Pak-kong (Little Northern River or the Lin-chow River)* flowing in from the other side,<sup>2</sup> also coming from the Hu-nan mountains, but on the north-west side.

The broad valleys of these three rivers, with their plentiful tributaries, are crossed by unevenly spaced mountains and hills. Together they constitute the Shiu-chow prefecture, divided into eleven districts. The prefecture is the Mission, with stable mission outposts (residences) in eight of the twelve districts.

The climate is a temperate zone one: in winter the mercury drops to around eight degrees centigrade below zero and in summer goes up to thirty four degrees.

The main cities at the time were: Shiu-chow in the central north, with around 60,000 inhabitants; then there were the main towns named after each valley: Nam-yung to the north-east with some 35,000 inhabitants, and Lin-chow to the west with around 30,000. All three were commercial centres. The initial syllable of each of the three names combine to also give the region the name *Nam Shiu Lin*.

Transport routes were the rivers and “mandarin paths”, narrow, roughly cobblestoned paths a few hand-spans wide, and some other similar paths.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pak-kong* (*Pak*, north; *kong*, river) is Cantonese. On the map: *Peh-kiang* is Mandarin. In the text we retain the *Pak-kong* version since it is used in all missionary sources and is the root of a number of geographical terms in the region.

<sup>2</sup> On the map: *Kuang-shui*.

## Christianity in the region

Christianity in the Shiu-chow region goes back to Father Matteo Ricci, Jesuit and founder of the modern missions to China. He was born in Macerata in 1552 and died in Peking in 1610.

He arrived in Shiu-chow in 1589 and set himself up in the suburb of Ho-sai, on the right bank of the *Pak-kong (Peh-kiang)* River, where, on a piece of land given him by the Viceroy of the region, he built a home and a church. Father Ricci remained in Shiu-chow for six years (26 August 1589 – 18 April 1595). In March 1592, he also made an apostolic journey as far as Nam-yung, bringing about some conversions there. Then he went back north, founding new residences, arriving finally in Peking, while his confreres continued the work of evangelisation at Shiu-chow.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the 18th century there were three churches in Shiu-chow. Even in 1925 one could read a stone with three characters inscribed on it: *Shin Thong Hong, (Church Street)*. But there was no longer any trace of the church. Persecutions destroyed the work of the Jesuits and Franciscans who succeeded them in their mission.<sup>4</sup>

The work of evangelisation was taken up again in 1850 by priests from the Paris Foreign Missions Society. Over a seventy year period they had revived the life of an almost extinct Christianity, setting up outstations in eight of the eleven districts.

In 1918, when the first two Salesian missionaries replaced the Paris Foreign Missions Society, Fathers Lessaint and Tong were in Nam-yung, Father Tzan in Lin-chow. Both returned to Canton. Only Father Ly, a Chinese secular priest, continued to look after the Ying-tak district.

## The mission residence at Shiu-chow

The mission residence at Shiu-chow consisted of some poor, small Chinese cottages with a few small courtyards, bought at the end of the previous century by the Paris Foreign Missions Society. A narrow road ran in front of the entrance, bordered on the inside by the remains of the medieval city walls. The residence took its name *Sin Tung Mun (New East Gate)* from the name of the nearby gate.<sup>5</sup>

There were very few Christians in Shiu-chow and the Mission was almost unknown.

Beyond the *Pak-kong River*, in the suburb of Ho-sai, the Mission had a house with land, bought by Father Antonio Fourquet, who later succeeded Bishop De Guébriant in the Canton Vicariate.

## The first Salesian missionaries

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<sup>3</sup> Fr Matteo Ricci left a beautiful description of the Shiu-chow region and an account of his six years of work as a missionary in this region, in his *Storia dell'introduzione di cristianesimo in Cina (History of the Introduction of Christianity in China)*, first published by Fr Pietro Tacchi Venturi under the title *Commentaries on China*, Macerata 1911; then, in a superb edition with a masterful commentary, by Fr Pasquale D'Elia, *Fonti Ricciane*, 3 vols. Rome 1942-1949. Father Ricci dedicated the first nine chapters of his third book to the residence in *Sciao-ceu (Shiu-chow)* (Ediz. Tacchi Venturi, Vol. I, *I Commentari della Cina*, pp. 195–251; Ediz. D'Elia, Vol. I, pp. 275–349.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Boll. Sal.* October 1929. The article is by Fr Caravario.

On 27 December 1917, the Salesian community in Macao was officially informed of the agreement for the new Mission. The confreres unanimously left the choice of which missionaries to send there to Fr Versiglia's judgement. He chose Fr Lodovico Olive, who was working in the Mission at Shek-ki in Heung-shan, and Fr Giovanni Guarona, teacher and prefect of studies at the orphanage in Macao.<sup>6</sup>

Fr Versiglia would continue to be in charge of the entire Salesian work in China, sharing, as he had always done, in the efforts and concerns of the missionaries and the confreres working at the orphanage.

Fr Olive and Fr Guarona left Macao two months later, on 26 February 1918. They spent a day in Canton with Bishop De Guébriant, who was like a father to them; then they pursued their journey by train to Shiu-chow, some 240 kilometres from Canton. They arrived at 6 p.m. on 28 February. Nobody was waiting for them at the station, but they knew how to find the road that led to the small residence. Fortunately they found Fr Pierrat from the Foreign Missions Society at home by chance, and he helped them bring their luggage from the station and get it onto a boat. The boat was supposed to leave the following day, the 1st of March, but left only on the 3rd. After two days on the river they arrived in Kong-how.<sup>7</sup> From there they went on foot to Chi-hing, where they arrived at 5 p.m.

### **In the hands of brigands**

Fr Guarona wanted to go immediately to Fong-tung, one of the oldest of the Christian communities, to spend the few days there. But Fr Olive, who needed to go on to Nam-yung, argued that he would not let him go alone until he had seen that everything was in place. They agreed to go together to Fong-tung, about twenty kilometres from Chi-hing.

They hired two litters,<sup>8</sup> and left at dawn on 6 March. Having got to the top of a mountain by 10 a.m., they stopped to take a breather. Seven masked bandits armed with pistols and large knives sprang from the nearby bushes. They tied the two missionaries up and stole whatever was of value on them and in their luggage.

Somewhat lighter in weight, bearers and missionaries returned to Chi-hing and reported the theft to the Mandarin. He promised he would have investigations made to discover who the thieves were, and they were, in fact, discovered. The following day, ordering two litters, the Mandarin had the two missionaries accompanied by a small military escort to Nam-yung. In the nearby residence at Kam-kong, Father Lessaint, of the Paris Foreign Mission Society, welcomed them with such kindness that they forgot the ugly encounter of the previous day. After some days, Fr Quarona reached his mission station at Chi-hing.<sup>9</sup>

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6 In M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*... p. 74 the text of the House Chronicle, the *Cronaca dell'Orfanotrofio di Macao* p. 56, with the report on the confreres' meeting. On the same page the complete text of the Agreement between Bishop De Guébriant and the Salesians.

7 The name means 'mouth of the river'. It is the point at which the left tributary coming from Chi-hing flows into the Nam-yung river.

8 It was a common means of transport in those regions, where roads, including the famous 'mandarin paths' simply became tracks. One could go by foot, boat or sedan chair (litter or rickshaw). The latter was the most costly, customarily used by the authorities and well-to-do people. Later, the Salesian missionaries made use of small Chinese horses, bicycles and motorcycles. A nice description of the "crowbar carriers" is given by Fr Versiglia in an account published by the *Boll. Sal.* September 1921, pp. 270–271.

9 *Boll. Sal.* November 1918, pp. 221–222; M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 77–79.

## **The war. Fr Versiglia at his missionaries' side**

It was just two months later that Fr Versiglia succeeded in visiting them. He left Macao on 28 April 1918. Having arrived in Canton, he heard that the war between north and south had flared up in the two districts. Everyone advised him not to expose himself to the risk. But it was precisely the risk his confreres faced that urged him to come to their side.

Just the same, he was forced to wait two days, because the rail line that was meant to take him from Canton to Shiu-chow, was reserved for military transport. On the third day he succeeded on taking a train packed full of soldiers, and after nine hours arrived in Shiu-chow.

The city was in turmoil and the mission residence full of Christians and pagans who had sought refuge and safety there. The following day Fr Versiglia left for Chi-hing with an escort of four soldiers given him by the Mandarin. Chi-hing lies on a mandarin path running between Schiu-chow and Nam-yung, some 60 kilometres from Shiu-chow and around 25 from Nam-yung.

The following day, after 15 hours of journey, Fr Versiglia was with Fr Guarona. The latter had not seen any confreres for two months.<sup>10</sup>

## **A tragic message**

“The constant movement of troops gave us to understand that there was fighting at Nam-yung” Fr Versiglia mentioned. This was confirmed and predicted by a tragic message which Fr Olive and Fr Lessaint sent on to us by hand through two men who reached us exhausted by their long trek. The message read thus: “We are between life and death: northern troops have claimed victory and are everywhere, bringing devastation, fire and death wherever they go. Nam-yung city has been burning for two days. The Christian village of Li-hau-kiau is a mass of ruins: the chapel and the mission house were first ransacked then set alight, and a few of the faithful were massacred. Crowds of ill-intentioned types sometimes come right up beneath the walls of our residence at Kam-kong, which serves as a defence for the village. More than two thousand people have taken refuge within the grounds of our residence. Telegraph the Consuls immediately to ask orders from Peking for our defence.”

Fr Guarona left immediately for Shiu-chow to send the telegram. He returned three days later, having travelled 120 kilometres on foot or by whatever means he could find.”<sup>11</sup>

## **In the war zone. Toward Nam-yung**

The following day the two missionaries ventured toward Nam-yung. “No soldiers stopped us” Fr Versiglia continues with his account. “We crossed the front held by the southerners. We were in no man’s land when we saw a crowd of people running madly toward us, encouraging us to follow their example and not go on ... because the northerners were about to arrive, and they were a cruel people.

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<sup>10</sup> *Boll. Sal.* November 1919, p. 289. The account is by Fr Versiglia.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 290.

“We pushed on undaunted; and our example led a few to turn back and return to their villages which had been abandoned in all the panic.

“We met soldiers and officials from the north who greeted us, calling us *Sanfù, Father*, and asked us for news of southern soldiers, something we did with great prudence. One good man, seeing the two *Sanfù*, came up to us speaking excitedly and with great emotion. Seeing that we understood nothing, he knelt, made the sign of the cross and showed us the medal of Our Lady that he wore around his neck.<sup>12</sup>

‘This is a Christian talking’ I said! ‘You could have told us immediately and we would have understood something.’ But this time it was he who understood nothing. Despite it all, he offered us some tea and made great gestures of warmth and courtesy.”

### **A city reduced to a heap of ruins**

“When we came within view of the city of Nam-yung, we were stopped by a sentry. We presented our visitor’s pass, asking him to take us to the commander.

‘If you want to go to the *Catholic church*, there is no need to speak to the commander’ he replied. and he assigned us two soldiers who accompanied us.”<sup>13</sup>

“We crossed the huge stone bridge that tradition believes was built under guidance from the Jesuits, and we saw a very sad spectacle before us. Nam-yung, only second to Canton as a city for business, was reduced to a heap of ruins: clouds of smoke from the fires still burning, and the stench of unburied corpses made the air unbreathable. The Christian village of Li-hau-kiau, on the outskirts of the city, had been devastated. The mission residence had been ransacked and bore signs of fire.”

### **Italian and French flags on the residence at Kam-kong**

“After three quarters of an hour of walking through the ruins we arrived at Kam-kong. Our hearts leapt: on the mission residence, surrounded by walls like a fortress, Italian and French flags were waving. The Catholic Mission had saved the village and all who had taken refuge there from around Nam-yung. A good number of survivors were there, because from the early days of the devastation nearby merchants had fled there, bringing their merchandise and continuing their business.

“Fr Olive, and Fr Lessaint from the Paris Foreign Missions, seeing us appear, believed they were seeing a vision from Paradise. We thank the Lord for so much joy.

“Meanwhile the telegram sent by Fr Guarona had brought good results. The same day we arrived in Kam-kong, we were invited to visit the general commanding the troops. We were welcomed with

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<sup>12</sup> The gesture of greeting a missionary by asking for a blessing on bended knee, which we see further on from individuals and a group of Christians, is connected with the custom of *prostration*. An ancient missionary approach, going back to Fr Ricci, placed the missionary among the higher social classes, as a way of giving him prestige. There was a time when, by imperial decree, the missionary was equivalent to sub-prefects, and when he went to the Sub-prefecture, he was received with military honours. The Bishops was on a par with the Viceroy of the region. It was a generally established custom in the missions for Christians to kneel before the missionary whenever they approached him for something. The missionaries accepted this ceremonial as an element of prestige to the advantage of their ministry. International treaties in the second half of the 19th century reinforced the authority of the missionary who was protected by foreign nations. Bishop Costantini, during his time as Apostolic Delegate in China, saw the negative effects of this, and the Council of Shanghai, which he presided over in 1924, forbade the custom. (Cf. C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, vol.I, Rome 1946, pp. 93–94; 174–177).

<sup>13</sup> *Boll. Sal.* November 1919, p. 291.

much respect. The general told us that he had received orders to protect the Catholic Mission. He expressed regret for damage caused to our residence at Li-hau-kiau and invited us to write up a report to receive due indemnification. Then he gave us a protection order, in several copies, stamped and with signatures, to affix to our properties in order to protect them from any likely harassment from the troops.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Catholic Mission grew in prestige and sympathy**

The missionaries, who had given asylum to so many during the devastation of the city and surrounds at Nam-yung, continued to help them save what could be saved from the ruins, intervening on their behalf with the military authorities. And thus the Catholic Mission grew in prestige and sympathy, including among the pagans.

Fr Versiglia and Fr Guarona returned to Chi-hing, once again crossing the war front. At Chi-hing Fr Versiglia said goodbye to Fr Guarona and left once again for Shiu-chow on foot, until he came across the river running alongside the road, and a large boat full of soldiers that was going down to Shiu-chow. He was taken on board with much respect, ate the rice for the evening meal with the soldiers and slept with them on the deck.

“In the morning, very early,” Fr Versiglia concludes in his report “the boat, which had pulled ashore overnight, set out once more and I was able to reach Shiu-chow, still very early, and celebrate Mass.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Missionaries urgently needed**

The first part of the agreement for passing the Shiu-chow Mission over to the Salesians had been fulfilled on 10 March 1918. But the two missionaries who had been sent had been reassigned, one to the Orphanage in Macao and the other to the Mission in Heung-shan, and had not been replaced. This reduction had not been painless, especially for the diocesan ecclesiastical authorities on whom the two works depended. New personnel were urgently needed from Italy and the request was that the two confreres reassigned either be returned to their first field of work, or be adequately replaced.

The 10th January 1920 was not so far away either, when the other clause in the agreement needed to be met: all missionaries from the Paris Foreign Missions Society were to be replaced. That required at least eight people.

Fr Versiglia made urgent requests to Turin. In a letter to Fr Calogero Gusmano, Secretary of the Superior Chapter, and with whom he was well acquainted, since he had been a fellow student at the Oratory in Valdocco, and with whom he shared many things closely, after expressing his joy at having the new mission encouraged him jokingly to “pull hard on the bowstring to get the needed personnel from the Superiors.” “If you too want to come” he concluded “there is no lack of places worthy of your zeal and ability.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 292–294.

<sup>15</sup> *Boll. Sal.*, November 1919, p. 295.

<sup>16</sup> *Lettera a Don Gusmano*, 6 January 1918; *Arch. Sal.* 9, 3, Vers. The same concern for personnel is expressed in a letter to Card. Cagliero, written from Shiu-chow on 25 January 1918: “It is the first time I have come into the new mission” he writes. I arrived yesterday evening at nine thirty.” He thanks the Cardinal for everything he did to obtain this Mission for the Congregation and asks him to continue the work by intervening with the Salesian Superiors to send the personnel needed. (*Arch. Sal.* 9, 3, Vers.).



## **The first group of missionaries for the new Mission**

It was not easy even for the Superiors to find suitable personnel: the war in Europe had absorbed a great number, including some of the best men, and personnel for Salesian houses was very scarce. They were successful in following through on the suggestion given by Fr Versiglia when he came to Turin in 1916. Exemption was obtained for six priests who made up the first group destined for the new Mission.<sup>17</sup>

The farewell ceremony took place in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin on 6 June 1918, and Cardinal Cagliero gave a memorable address which we have already referred to. They left Turin on 20 June and Naples on 4 July, arriving in Macao on 23 September, after a very risky voyage due to the war, and discomfort because of the hot season. The Turin-Macao journey took 95 days. One of the priests, Fr Ernesto Cattaneo, struck down by serious illness, remained in Port Said and from there was transferred to the Salesian House in Alexandria.<sup>18</sup>

### **At Shiu-chow. “I will sleep on the floor.”**

On 29 September, the new missionaries, led by Fr Versiglia, went to Canton to greet Bishop De Guébriant. On their return they visited the Missions at Siu-lam and Shek-ki in Heung-shan and were back in Macao on 5 October.<sup>19</sup>

Two days later, on 15 October, still with Fr Versiglia, they left for their new Mission. They arrived in Shiu-chow on the 17<sup>th</sup> and were welcomed by Fr Olive and Fr Peter Ly, a diocesan Chinese priest working in the Mission. The mission residence was small, poor and lacking in furniture. It would not have been easy to find a solution to accommodate that number of missionaries had they not for the most part been veterans of war accustomed to living in the trenches. They had no difficulty in splitting into groups and arranging things as best they could in the poor rooms.

“It fell to me to share a very small room with Fr Versiglia, my novice master at Genzano” Fr Garelli writes. “And here the master gave his final lesson to his disciple:

‘Look,’ he said ‘there is only one bed and one little place. I am accustomed to missionary life by now but you aren’t! You are still used to the comforts of civilian life, so you sleep on the bed and I will sleep on the floor.’

“He said it in a fatherly tone, but so firmly that the former novice had to obey and receive another effective lesson in humility and mortification from his former master.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> On the interest shown by the Italian Consul in Canton, Comm. Zenone Volpicelli, to gain the exemption, cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 77 and 82.

<sup>18</sup> The farewell ceremony for missionaries is described in the *Boll. Sal.* June-July 1918, pp. 105–107; the account of the voyage from Naples to Macao, by Fr Sante Garelli, can be found in the *Boll. Sal.* October 1918, pp. 198–203; February 1919, pp. 39–46; March 1919, pp. 69–73. Cf. M. Rassiga, *Op. cit.*, pp. 80–81. The following priests arrived in Macao on 23 September 1918: Frs Vincenzo Barberis, Carlo Frigo, Sante Garelli, Bassano Larenò-Faccini, Gaetano Pasotti, as well as Coadjutor, Brother Giovanni Gnavi. Jokingly it was said that “a cook and five missionaries” had arrived. At the reception for the new missionaries at Macao, Fr Garelli presented Fr Versiglia with the chalice, a gift from Fr Albera, which we spoke of in Chapter 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Cronaca di Macao*, pp. 65–66; *Boll. Sal.* June 1919, pp. 151–152.

<sup>20</sup> *Memorie di Don Sante Garelli*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.; *Boll. Sal.* June 1919, pp. 151–152; M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 81.

## Six months put aside to study Chinese

The following day Fr Versiglia returned to Macao. The missionaries, accompanied by Fr Ly, spent three days on a boat to reach the district of Lok-chong and set themselves up in the residence at Pak-heung, a village in open country, very peaceful and well suited to recollection and study. Six months followed of intense application to the study of the difficult Chinese language under the guidance of Fr Ly and the village doctor, a good Christian, who became their attentive teacher.

By Christmas, one of them, Fr Garelli, was able to go for ministry to the nearby district of Yan-fa. These were interesting beginnings for both parties, the first encounter of two very different civilisations with limited ways of expressing themselves. The warmth, interest and enthusiasm with which the different Christian communities welcomed the new and fledgling missionary were testimony to the good work of the former missionaries from the Paris Foreign Mission Society, and the effectiveness of the good seed of the Gospel in those simple souls. One name they were delighted with was that of *Lui Sanfù*, Fr Luigi Versiglia, who had visited the community previously: “All the Christians at Kong-ké asked me about him” says Fr Garelli in his report. “They settled down when I promised that he would be back among them soon.”<sup>21</sup>

## Fr Versiglia visits the districts in the west

In fact, to his work in the orphanage in Macao and concerns for the Mission in Heung-shan, Fr Versiglia added fairly frequent visits to the Mission in Shiu-chow.

After the visit to Fr Guarona and Fr Olive in the districts around Chi-hing and Nam-yung, in summer 1918 he made contact with Christians in the districts of Yan-fa and Lok-chong. He left Macao on 16 June and returned on 3 August.<sup>22</sup> Intestinal fever kept him at Macao for all of December. On 9 January 1919 he left once more for the Mission.<sup>23</sup>

He visited the Lin-chow district from 6 to 28 March 1919, accompanied by Fr Ly. At Lin-chow they were welcomed by Fr Tzan, a zealous missionary who had quadrupled the number of Christians in the district over three years of work. He accompanied Fr Versiglia on his visits to Christians in the region.

Particularly moving was the encounter with various Christian groups in villages around the small town of Tung-pi, some thirty kilometres north of Lin-chow. Around this important commercial centre with ten thousand inhabitants were a number of small hamlets, each of which had ten, twenty or even more Christian families.

“We have not yet been able to have a chapel there and less so a residence” Fr Versiglia writes in his report to Fr Albera. “The people, very simple and fervent, gather each evening in one of the their leader’s houses for prayer. They do the same on Sunday to sanctify the day.

“Their simplicity and seriousness really struck me. They have no human respect. When they meet the missionary, even when surrounded by pagans, they genuflect and make the sign of the cross and ask for a blessing. When they eat, also with pagans, they are not ashamed to make the

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<sup>21</sup> *Boll. Sal.* August 1919, pp. 211–213; Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 81-82. Fr Versiglia had gone to visit the districts of Ya-fa and Lok-chong in the summer of 1918 (*Cronaca di Macao*, pp. 61 and 64).

<sup>22</sup> *Cronaca di Macao*, pp. 61 and 64.

<sup>23</sup> *Cronaca di Macao*, pp. 69, 70, 71.

sign of the cross and say a short prayer before taking their food. And in particular, they are not afraid to speak about religion with everyone. This explains the extraordinary increase in Christians and catechumens which has taken place in just two or three years. Some years ago there were only about a hundred Christians. Now they baptised number 400 and there are a thousand catechumens.”<sup>24</sup>

### “Nomen meum est Gratia”

“Shortly before entering the town of Tung-pi,” Fr Versiglia continues “we saw a crowd of men and women, in two neat lines, waiting. They were Christians from a nearby village who had heard of our arrival and had come to meet us.

“What a sight it was to see those good elderly people kneel before us, make the sign of the cross and ask for a blessing! Then a young lad stepped forward and with beautiful pronunciation said to me in Latin:

‘*Salve, Pater!*’

‘Well done! What is your name?’

‘*Nomen meum est Gratia.*’

‘Better still! Do you have a mother and father?’

His knowledge of Latin finished at this point and he answered me in the musical mother tongue:

‘Yes! My father’s name is Joseph and my mothers’ name is Mary.’

‘Very good! May your holy family live on, with Mary, *Mater Gratiae.*’

“These fine Christians would wanted us to go down to their little hamlet but it was late and we could not satisfy their wish. We promised to visit them on our return.”

Fr Versiglia’s report continues and he speaks of one village converted by a single Christian who was now helping the missionary in an admirable way. Having visited other villages, they returned the way they had come after two days.<sup>25</sup>

### The singing of prayers could be heard in every house

Fr Versiglia picks up his account once more with “Young Gratia turned up once again to remind us that we had promised to visit his village. We followed him.

“The village had a nice appearance, and by contrast with the others looked fairly clean. Walking along the paths, here and there in one or other house we could hear prayers being sung.

‘What is this?’ I asked Fr Tzan who was accompanying me.

‘Oh! That’s nothing! You hear it toward evening! When they have finished work, all you can hear in the evenings is the singing of prayers. This village too is the conquest of that good Christians I spoke about.’”

<sup>24</sup> *Boll. Sal.* January 1920, pp. 18–19.

<sup>25</sup> *Boll. Sal.* January 1920, p. 19.

The prayer room for the Christian community was in little Gratia's home: a simple but clean room, with pictures of the Sacred Heart and Our Lady. A nice little room on the upper floor was kept for the missionary, also kept spotlessly clean.

The two missionaries entered the home of a strong young man who came to invite them, and they were present for the burning of the family idols, since the family had asked to embrace Christianity.

When they left, young Gratia asked if he could go with them as far as Lin-chow. But his mother, very prudently did not allow him to – it was some thirty kilometres away.

“The youngster continued to walk with us for a while”, the account goes on. “When we reached the town gates, he turned to me and said: ‘Father, turn around and look. The Christians are waiting to say goodbye to you.’

“I turned around and saw that the Christians had stopped on a kind of embankment at the entrance to the town. They knelt down. I blessed them and they all bowed their heads and made the sign of the cross.

“Our dear young lad, seeing that by now it was time for him to leave us, stood in front of me and Fr Tzan, made a slight bow, then slowly returned without turning back again. But we very clearly heard him sobbing, something he had kept back until now.

How many beautiful souls are just waiting for a merciful hand to lead them to God!”<sup>26</sup>

### **The problem of missionary personnel**

Following the visit to the Lin-chow district, Fr Versiglia returned to Macao, where he arrived on 9 April: “He came back in good health and we hope he remains among us for some time” the chronicler notes with evident affection. Fr Versiglia presided at the impressive ceremonies for Holy Week and the joy of Easter, which fell on 20 April that year.<sup>27</sup>

The first group of missionaries were still at their Pak-heung retreat, fully occupied with learning Chinese. Even if they were a very valuable gift given the scarcity of personnel due to the war raging in Europe, their number was absolutely inadequate for the needs of the Mission.

In the letter to the Rector Major, Fr Albera, five months earlier, in which Fr Versiglia announced the arrival of the six missionaries, five of them priests, he thanked him for them and let him know that the number of priests would at least need to be doubled.<sup>28</sup>

There were eleven districts. Of these, eight had Christians already formed and needed a resident missionary. Fr Guarona and Fr Olive had to return to their own places, who wanted them back. But what most concerned Fr Versiglia, as a good pastor and father, was avoiding a missionary being left on his own in a residence that would be no fewer than a hundred kilometres away from the nearest other one. “Isolated and alone like that is a real death. For nine out of ten missionaries, this isolation is the real reason for repugnance and uncertainty” he wrote to Fr Gusmano on 26 April 1919.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Boll. Sal.* February 1920, p. 42.

<sup>27</sup> *Cronaca di Macao*, pp. 75–76.

<sup>28</sup> *Lettera a Dn Paolo Albera*, 4 November 1918, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>29</sup> *Lettere a Don Calogero Gusmano*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers. This letter to Fr Gusmano accompanied the “Reminder” to the Superiors which is listed among letters to Fr Paul Albera (26 April 1919) and which we will refer to a little further on.

This topic was often raised in letters to Fr Albera and Fr Gusmano in 1918 and 1919, put in terms of heartfelt request. He feared that the dream so much desired of an independent Mission would vanish because he could not guarantee the proper conditions for it to happen.

### **Repeated failures**

In a letter to Fr Gusmano on 20 February 1919, Fr Versiglia expresses all the regrets of finding himself powerless before the tasks ahead of him, taken on in the name of the Salesian Congregation. In his profound humility, attributing the difficulty of the situation to his own inability, he describes the beautiful achievements at Macao, Heung-shan and the incipient Mission as repeated failures.

This is the attitude we have already noted in the letter to his Superior, Fr Cogliolo, at the time his first six year term as Rector expired, and in the report to the new Provincial, Fr Manassero. It was a feeling that gradually grew to the point of leading Fr Versiglia to state that he was useless for the Mission.

“Is it possible that I was always destined to set up failures that then happen?” he writes to Fr Gusmano. “One in the first orphanage at Macao, that we have been able to repair, thanks be to God. But now it is again in danger of falling apart because I am unable to replace the priests taken from the Macao orphanage (Fr Guarona) and from the Mission at Heung-shan (Fr Olive). Because of this, relations with the ecclesiastical authorities in Macao are rather tense. Another failure, the third, will be the new Mission ... Well, if that is the way the Lord wants it to be, so be it ... What pains me most is that the blame will fall on all of us ... and the fiasco will be even more serious in that not only will two works that have started so well be ruined (the Missions at Heung-shan and Shiu-chow), but it will bring dishonour on the Congregation ... I will try not to show any of this to the confreres, but I can assure you that I could weep. Pray to the Lord to give me resignation in all this.”

In a post script to the letter he adds: “Read the fourth article of the contract with the Bishop of Canton (the one we have recorded as the second condition). I can assure you that he will not let it be a dead letter. He is a man who does not go back on his word. As for Macao, if personnel are not in place by the time of the appointment of the new bishop (Bishop Paolina de Azevedo died on 17 February 1918), I am certain that we will have to take to our heels.”<sup>30</sup>

He had used the same words some months earlier, on 10 October 1918, writing to the Economist General, Fr Conelli, and mentioning in particular the reassignment of Fr Guarona to the house in Macao, and Fr Olive to the Mission at Heung-shan.<sup>31</sup>

### **I consider Fr Versiglia to be a brother**

Bishop De Guébriant was a true father to the Salesians. The promptness with which he followed up the Holy See's wish, and entrusted a part of his Vicariate to the Salesians was edifying, and he gave a touching reply to a letter from Fr Albera which reached him by hand through the first group of missionaries who arrived on 23 September 1918. He replied on 29 January 1919:

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<sup>30</sup> *Lettere a Don Calogero Gusmano*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>31</sup> *Lettere a Don Arturo Conelli*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

“I consider it an honour and good fortune to have been able to find a field of work for the Salesians of Don Bosco in part of the largest and best pagan country which is China. It has all been the work of Providence. The territory your religious family is involved in has, I believe, everything it takes to keep them busy and fruitful with their generous activities from now on and will be a solid basis for future expansion. There is already great confidence reigning between the Salesians and the Mission in Canton. I consider the very worthy Fr Versiglia to be like a brother, and all the good Salesians as my sons.”<sup>32</sup>

Fr Versiglia had to be content knowing that he had won such respect and affection. Certainly he was very much concerned with corresponding to the kindness of such a bishop.

### **Providing direction for the Salesian work in China**

Another problem he put to the Superiors in a memo on 26 April 1919 concerned the management of the Salesian Works in China which could now no longer depend on just one person.

The Macao Orphanage now had 200 pupils, in two sections, students and working boys. Eight Salesian confreres were teaching there and twelve teachers from outside. The Heung-shan Mission had to be added to that, with four missionaries and some twenty catechists, male and female. It was not conceivable that one person at the head of all this work could still take on responsibility for the new Mission two days travel away, and since it was only beginning, it needed more serious and difficult work demanding major responsibility.

“What has happened over the last two years will happen again: complaints from both sides; both sides will suffer; in one place things are interrupted and in the other they can’t continue,” Fr Versiglia wrote to Fr Gusmano in a spirit of profound humility. Yet everyone understood that the task was greater than the strengths of one man and admired his ability and spirit of sacrifice and loved him as a father.<sup>33</sup>

### **I want to remain a simple missionary**

For the new Mission at Shiu-chow, Fr Versiglia suggested a superior who would look after it directly and also have authority over all Salesian Work in China. He asked the Superiors to choose someone from among the confreres who had already arrived there or who would come in the future.

“As for myself” he writes “if I have any desire, it is to remain in this Mission, but as a simple missionary. The Mission, which we can say is already established, needs a broad mind and a strong hand to take it forward and give it its due development.

“The Superiors have really made some sacrifices by sending the personnel who have already arrived and those you have told me who are to come. Choose a worthy Superior from among these, or choose someone else who can do it, thus completing the work.

“I can only thank the Superiors for backing me in this work which has placed our Congregation on the level of so many others in this country.

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<sup>32</sup> *Annali*, IV, 384–385.

<sup>33</sup> *Lettera a Don Calogero Gusmano* 4 October 1919; Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

“I thank you with all my heart and hope that with the life and strength I still have left from the Lord, I can spend it all working quietly and silently in this Mission that we have so longed for.”<sup>34</sup>

We note his keen love for the Mission in this memo, his complete self-dedication and constant humility. It echoes what he wrote to Fr Barberis from Genzano, after a few months as Rector of the house and looking after the novices: “Genzano needs a stronger person than me, a man who knows how to do things better than me.”

### **A new group of missionaries**

The new group of missionaries, nine priests, sailed from Marseilles on 23 August 1919, and arrived in Hong-kong on Sunday 28 September.<sup>35</sup> At the dinner given to the new missionaries, Fr Versiglia “expresses [his] satisfaction” (his own words) “because he finally had a group of missionaries that could bring honour to our dear Mission in China.”<sup>36</sup> It was now in a position to ask to be separated from the French Mission and for an independent Vicariate to be erected.

Fr Versiglia had recommended this to Fr Gusmano in the earlier quoted letter of 26 April 1919, which went with the memo to the Superiors bearing the same date.

“It would be good to insist with Propaganda” he wrote “on the separation and official erection of the Mission as a Vicariate Apostolic. This is what the Apostolic Delegate for India recommended to me” and he added: ‘Do not be afraid to insist on this.’ Bishop De Guébriant, too, asks me every time I go to Canton: ‘When will your Superiors complete the procedures for separation and erection of a Vicariate?’”

### **Fr Olive dies**

On their arrival in China, however, the new missionaries found the confreres in mourning. Days earlier, on 18 September, Fr Lodovico Olive had passed away at the age of 52.

He had come to China with Fr Versiglia. They were the only ones remaining from the first expedition: two saints who had worked for thirteen years side by side, loving each other as brothers.

If it is true that works which God has wanted have the gentle soul of a saint as their foundation, Salesian work in China could be said to be wanted by God because it was founded on two foundation stones, two saintly men.

Here is how Fr Versiglia wrote to Fr Albera on 2 October 1919:

“You cannot imagine the sorrow it has been for us in losing dear Fr Olive. He had won everyone’s heart, especially in the Missions, people who saw the true model of the Salesian missionary in him. They loved him very much; but now that he is no longer among us, we notice much more how much they loved him and we feel the hole he has left just so much.

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<sup>34</sup> *Pro memoria* from Macao, 26 April 1919, preserved among the letters to Fr Paul Albera, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>35</sup> Priests: Galdino Bardelli, Luigi Boccassino, Stefano Bosio, Carlo Braga, Giuseppe Colombo, Giuseppe Cucchiara, Umberto Dalmasso, Bartolomeo Fochesato, Beniamino Ronchi. The account of the voyage in the *Boll. Sal.* January 1920, pp. 13–14; cf. also M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 82–83.

<sup>36</sup> *Cronaca di Macao* p. 86.

“But the one who feels his loss most is myself since we worked side by side for thirteen years, more than if we had been brothers. I shared the work the sorrows, the joys and hopes with him. Now that I no longer see him by my side, I feel that I have been thrown into a kind of isolation ... Patience! May the Lord’s will be done. I am somewhat consoled that from heaven he will show me the same charity and perhaps even more effectively.”<sup>37</sup>

### **“This one will be Don Bosco’s!”**

Fr Olive’s vocation is closely connected with the supernatural gifts that Don Bosco was so endowed with.

In 1883, on the way back from Marseilles, Don Bosco had been at dinner with the noble Olive family. At table, Don Bosco said a word or two about the future of each of the children who had the honour of serving the diners. When it came to Lodovico, he said: “This one will be Don Bosco’s!”

And indeed, he went to the Salesian novitiate at Foglizzo. In December 1886, struck down by a serious bout of typhoid, he was brought to Turin. Don Bosco visited him and promised him that the Help of Christians would cure him. Our Lady had revealed it to him in a dream. The good cleric too, whom the doctors had by now given up on, had a dream in which Don Bosco appeared to him and told him:

“Take it easy: within ten days you will come and find me in my room.”<sup>38</sup>

And that is how it was. Ten days later the cleric, recovered, went to Don Bosco who told him he would go as a missionary to China.

In spite of all his work and preoccupation, Fr Versiglia immediately set about writing a brief life as an example and encouragement for the young. Two months later, for Christmas, it was complete and was sent to the press in instalments in a magazine we will speak about immediately, and then in a small booklet issued in Turin.<sup>39</sup>

### **The first edition of *Inter Nos***

On the same day the new missionaries arrived at the house at Macao, on 29 September 1919, the first edition of a publication came out that was to last for many years and help cement the confreres in the “family spirit” that is essential to religious community life.

Here is how Fr Versiglia presented it in a brief editorial which mirrors his spirituality permeated by charity and acceptance of sacrifice.

“Our magazine comes without any pretence. Its very title, *Inter Nos*, says that it deals with family matters; and as such, I want it to be regarded as we regard other things that belong to our

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<sup>37</sup> *Lettere a Don Paolo Albera*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers. After taking part in the retreat in Macao (31 August – 6 September 1919), Fr Olive set out to return to the Mission at Nam-yung. He stopped by to greet the Christians at Shek-ki in Heung-shan, who were very fond of him and gave him an enthusiastic welcome. He set out once more on his journey, but had to stop in Canton because he was struck down by cholera, which brought him to the grave a few days later (Cf. *Cronaca di Macao*, pp. 84-85; *Inter Nos*, no. 1, 29 September, Mortuary Letter written by Fr Versiglia).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. MB, XVIII, 255.

<sup>39</sup> Mons. Luigi Versiglia, *Vescovo titolare di Caristo e Vicario Apostolico di Shiu-chow (Cina), Un Missionario Salesiano in Cina*, Turin, SEI, *Letture Cattoliche* May 1922.



family. It is reserved to us alone, just as a well-ordered family is jealous and careful to see that no outsider can learn its secrets.

“It is aimed at keeping everyone up to date with events of some importance that happen in the various districts. So we need everyone to show interest and send abundant news items to the editorial staff on what is happening in his region and is worth being known about.

“I would have liked to have begun with a cry of joy, but unfortunately I must begin with a cry of sorrow. Death has taken our champion, Fr Olive, from us, our older member, our model and sometimes also our confidant.

“Is the fact that our magazine has begun its life in sorrow perhaps not a clue to his great resistance in misfortune and the difficulties which human things are necessarily subject to? I hope so! And while I wish a long and prosperous life to our magazine I also hope that all our confreres find it an effective stimulus to ever greater solidarity that brings us all together around our dear Mission entrusted to us by the Lord.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Finally in our Mission**

On Sunday 19 October 1919, seven new missionaries who had arrived in Macao left for their Mission at Shiu-chow. Fr Versiglia accompanied them. Fr Beniamino Ronchi had reached Shek-ki in Heung-shan a few days earlier, the Mission that had once been Fr Olive’s, and Fr Boccassino had stayed in Macao to replace Fr Guarona as prefect of studies and teacher.<sup>41</sup>

The group of new missionaries arrived in Shiu-chow on the afternoon of 21 October 1919. Their Salesian confreres and a group of Christians were waiting for them at the station. The Salesians had already been in the Mission for a year.

“We threw ourselves into the arms of our dear friends,” one of the new arrivals writes “our hearts willed with immense joy at finding ourselves finally in our Mission.”<sup>42</sup> The pouring rain did not lessen their enthusiasm.

### **I experienced the most touching moments of my Salesian life**

“Over those days Fr Versiglia gave us some practical rules for our missionary life,” one of the new missionaries tells us.<sup>43</sup>

“The wonderful days spent at Shiu-chow with the happy band of companions” writes another who had been at the mission for more than a year “will not be soon forgotten ... If I could have had some doubts and symptoms of discouragement in the hermit-like solitariness the first year of mission, the days at Shiu-chow, and especially the evening of 25 October, completely removed all that for me. That evening I experienced the most touching moments of my Salesian life.”<sup>44</sup>

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40 *Inter Nos*, Anno I, no. 1, Macao, 29 September 1919, p. 1.

41 *Cronaca di Macao*, pp. 86–87.

42 Fr Galdino Bardelli in *Inter Nos*, Anno 1, no. 7, p. 1.

43 Testimony of Fr Bartolomeo Fochesato, *Summ.* p. 130.

44 *Inter Nos*, Anno 1, no. 10, p. 1.

## **The Mission is dedicated to the Help of Christians \**

On 24 October 1919, the commemoration of Mary Help of Christians, a very important and significant ceremony took place for the life of the new Mission in the poor chapel at the residence in Shiu-chow. It was like its baptism.

One of those present, Fr Guarona, recalls the day:

“A memorable day in the history of our Mission and of special importance in development of devotion to the Virgin Help of Christians!<sup>45</sup>

On the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup>, a beautiful statue of the Help of Christians was brought out. It was given a year earlier to Fr Garelli by female students at the University of Turin. It was placed on the altar in the chapel. On the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup>, Fr Versiglia celebrated the community Mass with all the missionaries present, and in the afternoon, after Benediction, they all recited the formula of consecration of themselves and the new Mission to Mary Help of Christians. It was the same formula that Fr Albera and his Chapter had used in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin for the celebration of the jubilee of the Sanctuary.<sup>46</sup>

The Mission had a name: “Our Lady Help of Christians Mission” and a protectress who made her protection felt in an extraordinary manner.

“Trust in Jesus in the Eucharist and in Mary Help of Christians and you will see what miracles are.” This was the recommendation that Don Bosco personally gave Fr Cagliero on the eve of the departure of the first missionary expedition for America.<sup>47</sup>

Don Bosco’s promise came true in a moving way in the first year of the life of the new Shiu-chow Mission.

### **“And he sent them on ahead of him in pairs” (Lk 10:1)**

On Sunday 26 October 1919, the Christian community at Shiu-chow also joined in the solemn memorial the Salesians had celebrated within their Salesian religious family. Fr Versiglia celebrated the Mass in honour of the Help of Christians and the group of missionaries provided the singing. One of them explained the significance of the celebration to the faithful.

On Monday 27 October, the twelve missionaries left in pairs for their mission.<sup>48</sup> The thirteenth, Fr Versiglia, followed them a little later for his visit to the individual districts.

That was certainly a day of real satisfaction for the zealous head of Mission who had prepared for it with so much work, anxiety and suffering. The final clause in the agreement with Bishop De Guébriant was fulfilled two months early: all the Mission residences had their missionary. And one of the most heartfelt of their good father’s wishes was fulfilled, so that his sons would be happy: none of the missionaries was alone.

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45 *Inter Nos*, Anno I, no. 7, p. 2.

46 See Ch. 1, opening paragraphs.

47 MB. XI. p. 395.

48 Of the five missionaries belonging to the 1918 expedition, four remained. Fr Garelli had gone to Macao. To them was added Fr Guarona, who was in the Mission from March 1918, and the seven new missionaries from the 1919 expedition.

### **In the district of Yan-fa**

The missionaries had been in their districts for three months. Toward the end of January 1920, Fr Versiglia began his visits, going first to the district of Yan-fa.

“I had to do the first stage on foot,” he writes in his report “because it was not possible to find a litter or a bearer. Fear of war which was about to break out had led all the men to go into hiding, fearing they would be recruited to the soldiers’ munitions and baggage. It meant a journey of seven hours (about 40 kms). Recommending myself to the Lord, I left early in the morning, and arrived, happy to spend the night in our residence at Tong-tong, where Fr Larena had come to wait for me. The following morning we set out again together, and after three hours arrived in Kong-ké, the main Christian centre in the district.”<sup>49</sup>

He visited the various Christian groups around, spending a day here and there. Fr Larena had been working in this district for more than a year. Fr Fochesato spent some months with him, taken up learning Chinese language and customs.

### **In the district of Lok-chong**

From there he moved on to the district of Lok-chong.

“Fr Barberis’ and Fr Bardelli’s joy at seeing us was inexpressible,” writes Fr Versiglia in his report to the Rector Major “and mine as well in finding both of them in excellent health. I saw with pleasure that they had already found out how to worm their way into the minds and hearts of the Christians. The gentle approach and good manner of St Francis de Sales had triumphed over some of the more reticent ones who, although they were Christians, had not been to church for some time. The people note with satisfaction that the new missionaries show a preference for the children. Don Bosco is making inroads! ...”<sup>50</sup>

He also visited Pak-heung in this district, where the confreres from the 1918 expedition had done their study of Chinese. The presence of a good group of missionaries for many months had given the Christians in the town good momentum. There was the school, church, and good attendance at the sacraments. A number of girls had done some study and were consecrated to the Lord.<sup>51</sup>

“Having spent some days in Pak-heung,” Fr Versiglia concludes “I went back down to Shiu-chow to take up my visits in another direction.”<sup>52</sup>

### **The need for an interior life**

Fr Versiglia was convinced that at the foundations of every apostolate lies deep piety and union with God. This was how he lived. He took advantage of the beginning of Lent to send all confreres a circular on 15 February 1920, on a topic that was usual for him when he spoke to the faithful – prayer.

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49 *Boll. Sal.* September 1921, p. 240.

50 *Boll. Sal.* October 1921, p. 268.

51 *Le kuneong*, consecrated virgins who lived in the house, like in the early Church, and taught catechism, especially to women and children.

52 *Boll. Sal.* October 1921, p. 268.

“We are ambassadors of God” he wrote, quoting St Paul. “So we need to be in constant communication with our heavenly King, to get to know his will in order to pass it on to souls, and to let him know about the needs of souls. It is a duty of our office so many times to be mediators between God and the sins of human beings, praying to keeping the Lord’s punishments far from us and the people! How will the priest do this if he is distracted and lacking in a spirit of piety?”<sup>53</sup>

### **The five commandments of the missionary**

He summed up the thinking of this lengthy circular in five brief points, written in his own neat and refined hand on the back of a holy picture:

1. The missionary who does not remain united to God is a channel cut off from its source. 2. The missionary who prays a lot will also achieve a lot. 3. Show much love for souls; this love will be the chief of all the strategies for doing good. 4. Hope for the best always and in everything; but be content with what happens. 5. Without Mary Help of Christians we Salesians are nothing.

The holy picture has a date: Shiu-chow, 12 February 1920.<sup>54</sup>

The final point concerning the Help of Christians is further developed in a letter to Fr Albera written a few days later on 28 February. It merits being recorded at least in part. The Help of Christians whom the Mission was named after, began to work “miracles”, according to Don Bosco’s promise to Fr Cagliari.

### **The Help of Christians begins to work miracles**

“All of us, her sons in China,” Fr Versiglia writes “have the impression that the moment has arrived when Mary Help of Christians begins to show her power in this country as well, according to the promise of our Don Bosco.

“I myself have seen with my own eyes, going around visiting the confreres spread across the various districts of the Mission, that devotion to the Virgin Help of Christians obtains what we for some time have not been able to. In one district, for example, with the simple popular approaches which are characteristic of Don Bosco’s system, and especially through devotion to Mary Help of Christians, we have achieved the reconciliation of an entire community of some 300 Christians who had been in disagreement with the missionaries for years, so much so that the community had even been banned. Now that group of Christians is united with us and more affectionate than anyone could imagine.

“In another district, one group of Christians was almost destroyed; almost everyone had left the faith and no missionary wanted to look after them any more. Our men went there and began to work with the few survivors of the shipwreck. They nurtured devotion to Our Lady and this triumphed. Almost all the apostates returned and the one who was the main cause of the apostasy has already offered the Mission one of his houses as a chapel.

<sup>53</sup> Two circulars of Bishop Versiglia, Arch. Sal., 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>54</sup> The handwritten item was preserved by Fr Carlo Braga, then reproduced in hundreds of copies, distributed as a reminder of the retreat to confreres. Bishop Versiglia’s signature was added, preceded by a the small cross customary before a bishops’ name, then a contradictory date, 12-2-1920, when Fr Versiglia was not yet a bishop. The original signed picture opened with a date and had no signature. Copies of the reproduction were given to Central Salesian Archives by Fr Pietro Pomati, who had seen to the version described above.

“The good that our Fr Olive has already done through devotion to Our Lady is incalculable. We can never sufficiently lament his passing. One could say that a good number of Christian communities have been brought back to life.

“I receive letters from the confreres from all districts, including the most distant ones, in which they assure me that Mary Help of Christians brings about conversions and is bringing many groups of young people to us. even though we cannot yet baptize them, they are fond of our dear missionaries and through them, of our Christian religion.”<sup>55</sup>

### **Our Lady has done everything**

Among the reports from the missionaries Fr Versiglia was referring to, is almost certainly a letter from Fr Frigo, written from Lin-chow two days earlier, on 26 February 1920, which we summarize here:

“Very Reverend Fr Rector, I am astonished at what is happening around me. It is not easy to express what I feel within.”

The introduction talks about a Chinese Protestant teacher who had knocked back a lavish stipend, a nice house, a beautiful school, the opportunity to make interesting journeys for free, and the offer of a good marriage ... to become a Catholic teacher.

“We had done nothing,” Fr Frigo goes on to say. “Fr Ly (the Chinese missionary we have mentioned a number of times) had limited himself to offering explanations from day to day as he asked ... Our Lady did it all! He reasoned this way: If Mary is the Mother of Jesus and Jesus is adored as the true God, then why do we not venerate his Mother? ... and since the Protestant pastors say they are followers of the Apostles, why do they not abandon everything like them, including their wives?

“He is around thirty years old: he is very well known in the city and much respected. The pastor complained when he saw him distancing himself ... He has been with us now for a week. The first prayer he wanted to learn is the Hail Mary ... He says he wants to make up for what he has not done over the four years he spent with the Protestants. Every evening he teaches about twenty of his students how to pray. He studied in Canton and has an excellent teaching method.”

### **Don Bosco’s educational system makes inroads in China too**

Then Fr Frigo gives an item of personal, but very significant news: “By now the whole city knows that *San fù* (Father) works in the garden (something inconceivable in the classic pagan mentality of the day), plays and runs about with the boys ... And our house is frequented daily by every rank of individual, especially the upper classes ...”<sup>56</sup>

Don Bosco’s method was also making inroads in China; and by welcoming boys from every level, they also made inroads with the upper classes. Fr Versiglia had to be content with the beginnings of a mission he had so much longed for and prepared for with so much suffering.

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55 *Lettere a Don Paolo Albera*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

56 *Inter Nos*, Anno 1, no. 27, p. 3.

## **The visit to the districts of Nam-yung Chi-hing in strange company**

The visit to Nam-yung followed in April 1920. It was in strange company. The Salesian Mission at Nam-yung had given refuge to the families of two officers belonging to troops defeated in a battle that had taken place days earlier in the region. The two fugitives found themselves in Shiu-chow with some of their soldiers. They had wanted to see their families again, but since it was in enemy territory, it meant putting their lives at risk. The only thing they could do was to place themselves under the protection of the missionary, disguising themselves as domestics. They gave a lengthy explanation, begging Fr Versiglia to understand, naturally taking on the expenses of his travels and promising an offering for the Mission.

“Given that it was all about restoring two poor devils to their families,” Fr Versiglia writes “I considered it to be a work of charity. At the established time they appeared with three litters: a fine gift for me, with three litter-bearers and two more for them. Five disguised soldiers escorted us. The two officers, dressed like ordinary folk, took their place in the litters as if they were my domestics. I felt sorry for them for seeing them so humiliated. Then I reflected that it could be a healthy and good thing for their pride to be somewhat humiliated before a foreigner, whom they despised and abhorred in their heart.”

The journey was quick and comfortable. The two officers then left a good donation for the Nam-yung Mission.

“At Nam-yung,” Fr Versiglia continues “I found that Fr Colombo and Fr Bosio had made good progress in Chinese. I saw a small school of Christians and pagans revitalized. Over those days they had also begun work on repairing the large and beautiful church of St Joseph. It had been built halfway through the last century and had then been abandoned for various reasons.

“I spent three days in Nam-yung and felt sorry to be leaving those dear confreres, as if it presaged some misfortune. In fact I was not to see one of them again: poor Fr Colombo, taken from us suddenly just when from our way of seeing things, his work seemed more necessary than ever.”<sup>57</sup>

On the return journey, Fr Versiglia visited Chi-hing, the district centre, where he found Fr Guarona, who accompanied him to Fong-tung, an attractive, pleasant town in the region, but unfortunately plundered and devastated by pirates and so now very poor. Waiting for him at the town gates was Fr Dalmasso with a group of Christians.

“After two days stay in the pleasant highland area of Fong-tung,” Fr Versiglia writes “I went down to Shiu-chow, leaving Fr Dalmasso to enjoy the beauties of nature and to refine the highland people with his zeal.”<sup>58</sup>

## **A memo for the Superiors in Turin**

Looking after the new Mission, which had now become his main task, did not, however, mean that Fr Versiglia had forgotten his sons in Macao and Heung-shan.

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<sup>57</sup> *Boll. Sal.* October 1921, pp. 269–272.

<sup>58</sup> *Boll. Sal.* November 1921, p. 296.

Fr Bernardini, Fr Versiglia's *alter ego* in Macao, had to go to Turin for several international conferences – the Cooperators and the Past Pupils of Don Bosco and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, all taking place at the same time at Valdocco from 20-22 May 1920.<sup>59</sup>

From Shiu-chow, dated 20 April 1920, he sent a memo concerning things he needed to ask or have explanation for in Turin. Essentially it contained two matters: request for personnel for the technical school in Macao and for the Missions; a field of work and specific preparation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for when they were to come to China.

It is a minor masterpiece for its profound understanding of the Chinese situation, the mentality of the people, and the physical, intellectual and moral attributes a missionary needed to work effectively.

Regarding the age of personnel he suggests: no younger than twenty-five years old, otherwise their physical development would be compromised; no older than thirty-five, otherwise it would be too difficult to adapt.

Regarding the technical school he says: “China is a field preparing for real triumphs for an institution which is aimed at the working class. But it is a field that can only be conquered by clear technical and practical superiority.”<sup>60</sup>

### **If sacrifices are needed, count on us**

After the visit to the Chi-hing and Nam-yung districts, Fr Versiglia went down to Macao. From there, on 24 May 1920, he wrote to the Rector Major, Fr Albera:

“I have come down to Macao to spend the feast of Mary Help of Christians here with the confreres and Cooperators. These days our hearts are in Turin, near the altar which marks Mary's, Don Bosco's and the Salesian Works' triumphs, and near our Superiors, to whom the Lord has shown a wonderful manifestation of his affection and filial attachment this year from all around the world.

“We really wanted our dear Fr Bernardini to arrive in time to pass on the compliments of our distant sons in China to the Congresses! An unexpected incident has delayed him. I hope he will at least arrive in time to present you, beloved Father, with our compliments for your name day.

“At any rate, let this note of mine serve to assure you that your sons bear great affection for you and that they are working together for the glory of God, devotion to Mary Help of Christians, and the good name of our dear Society in these distant lands.

“If sacrifices are needed for this, count on us, because we have the good will. I do not know if our strengths correspond to our aspirations, but the desire to sacrifice ourselves is great.

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<sup>59</sup> After the Congresses, on 23 May 1920, Pentecost Sunday, the monument to Don Bosco was blessed with great solemnity in the *Piazza di Maria Ausiliatrice*. The suggestion was made by the first International Past Pupils Congress in 1911. The monument was to be blessed in 1915, the centenary of Don Bosco's birth. The First World War saw it postponed until 1920. On the three International Congresses and the blessing of the monument, cf. extensive reports in the *Boll. Sal.* May 1920, pp. 113–120; June-July 1920, pp. 141–188; cf. also *Annali*, IV, pp. 390–400.

<sup>60</sup> *Lettera a Don Vincenzo Bernardini*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

“Beloved Father, bless these desires of ours and place them at the feet of the Most Blessed Virgin, to confirm them and bring them to success.”<sup>61</sup>

### **Love for the Congregation, a thirst for sacrifice, humility**

The dominant sentiments in this letter are the love the confreres have for the Congregation, for which they were of one heart, and their thirst for sacrifice for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Fr Versiglia saw these sentiments in his confreres, but they were ones that he also nurtured in his heart in a special way. He had always born the heaviest burden and did so joyfully, almost with delight. In his deep humility there was just one thing he feared: not being able to fulfil his role, to ruin the work the Lord wanted because of his inability. This awareness, solely the result of his humility, came to the fore in every difficulty, as it did in preparing for the new Mission to pass from the Macao Vicariate to the Salesians. And now it was becoming the profound and anxious problem of being aware that the day was approaching when the future Bishop of Shiu-chow was to be chosen.

### **I desire neither titles nor offices**

At the end of 1919, his friend and confidant, Fr Gusmano, in a letter we are not in possession of, had probably faced him with the possibility that he would be chosen.

Fr Versiglia replied from Shiu-chow on 3 April 1920.

“You are always the scoundrel! You really do know how to take people for a ride ... Who gave you ability to load someone up with such a burden and give him the capacity to bear it? ...

“But I hope matters have been decided by now and things have reached a conclusion. As for me my friend, I desire neither titles nor offices. Titles and offices there certainly must be. But sincerely, I want others to have them (in another letter to Fr Gusmano, on 29 January 1920, he had already put forward four names, asking him to pass them on to the Superiors). This is how I would like my insistence to be interpreted. Not only do I authorize you but I beg you to let this be known to the Superiors. I will willingly stay in the Mission, but off to the side. I will gladly help out with what little I can give, but I no longer have the strength to bear the responsibility, and especially a responsibility of this kind.

“However it is not much use talking like this because I believe that the Superiors know me well enough and so will save me and the Congregation from any blunders.

“Fr Bernardini will arrive the coming June, and will need some rest. Before he returns, give him some precise orders in this regard.”<sup>62</sup>

### **Two memorable dates: 9 and 22 April 1920**

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61 *Lettere a Don Paolo Albera*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

62 *Lettere a Don Calogero Gusmano*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.



After the celebrations for the feast of Mary Help of Christians, and after making contact with all the confreres in Macao and the missionaries who had come from Heung-shan, Fr Versiglia dealt with some ordinary administrative matters and went back up to Shiu-chow to once more pick up the visits to the districts.

When Fr Versiglia wrote to Fr Albera from Macao on 24 May, Rome had already decided on things for the new Mission. On 9 April 1920 the Salesian Mission of Shiu-chow was erected as a Vicariate<sup>63</sup> and at the Consistory on 22 April, Fr Versiglia was appointed as Titular Bishop of Caristo and Vicar Apostolic of Shiu-chow. On 24 April Fr Gusmano, the Secretary of the Superior Chapter, sent Fr Versiglia the official announcement of his appointment.<sup>64</sup>

But the letter took some two months to arrive in China. Nothing was known for certain there. But some “rumours” had alarmed and saddened Fr Versiglia.

Before setting out on his travels again to visit the districts, he wrote again from Shiu-chow to the Rector Major on 6 June 1920, again offering greetings for his name day which he had already entrusted to Fr Bernardini; also to let him know of the heightened spiritual atmosphere of the confreres, but especially to bare his soul regarding the rumours that were circulating.

### **A moving testimony of spiritual greatness and deep humility**

His letter is a moving testimony of great spiritual stature. A soul that had so plumbed the depths of humility was certainly bound to reach the heights of perfection.<sup>65</sup>

“Very Rev. and beloved Father, I have not been in a hurry to send you greetings for upcoming celebrations because, knowing that our dear confreres, Fr Bernardini would arrive in time, I have given him the job of representing your distant sons in China.

“What do I want to say in this letter?

“I can tell you that we know how, in your fatherly kindness, you are so good to us and that we do our best to love you as well. I say that we do our best, because loving you theoretically costs us nothing, and indeed is a pleasure, nevertheless we want to try to be sons as you, beloved Father, would like us to be; meaning we want to resolutely preserve the spirit of Don Bosco, and be fearless propagators of devotion to Mary Help of Christians, conquerors of souls, to spread the kingdom of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

“I assure you, beloved Father, that everyone is making generous efforts to ensure that these three characteristics are realized in himself, and that on this point we are united with a single thought and desire.

“Unity among ourselves, cemented by these three aspirations, is such that when I think of it, my eyes fill with tears of consolation. The warmth and understanding among us is such that we are one family, happy, cheerful, ready to mutually support each other and always intent on pursuing common interests.

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63 The text of the decree of erection of the Vicariate in M. Rassiga, *Breve Cenno storico*, p. 89.

64 A brief news item, included just as it was going to press, in the *Boll. Sal.* May 1920, at the bottom of page 120, already gave the “joyful news” of the erection of the Shiu-chow Mission to a Vicariate and Fr Versiglia’s appointment as Vicar Apostolic.

65 Cf. St Augustine, *Sermo LXIX: De verbis Evang. Matthaei ch. 11, 28-29, Venite ad me omnes qui laboratis et onerati estis etc.*; ML, vol. 38, col. 441.

“In very many things, we see that Mary Help of Christians is guiding us. Indeed, it seems to me that I can and must say that the story of our Mission from the beginning until today is due to Mary and the many graces from her motherly kindness.

“There is just one thing I fear, and that various signs make me suspect to my horror and humiliation ... what will happen to our Mission if I remain its leader? I who am lacking in virtue, knowledge, ability of any kind, now a lot weaker physically ... What will happen to our dear Mission?

“I hope that the Superiors have thought about this; but in any case, my hands joined, I beg you to consider saving me from such a serious responsibility and at the same time such a great humiliation.

“Give me your blessing, beloved Father, and with me, bless all your sons in China.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Visit to districts in the west**

In this state of mind, Fr Versiglia resumed his visit to the Mission. Alone, by train, he went as far as Lin-kong-how at the confluence of the Pak-kong River with its tributary the Lin-chow River.<sup>67</sup> This is the southernmost point of the Mission. Here it opens out into the large valley that leads up to Linchow and then to the mountains of Hu-nan, where the river has its source. The transport network includes the river and its tributaries. The distance by river between Lin-kong-how and Lin-chow is about 180 kilometres. Boats usually take about six days upstream and three downstream.

Fr Versiglia was awaited by Fr Pasotti, Fr Ly and a good group of Christians at Lin-kong-how. From there, three hours along the Lin-chow River, Fr Versiglia and Fr Pasotti arrived at the entrance of a small tributary to the east, and following it another two hours by boat, they came to Sui-pin. The conference of the two rivers has the shape of a ploughshare and is called *Li-tau-tsui* (point of the plough).<sup>68</sup>

This was the point where, ten years later, Fr Versiglia was martyred.

There were some thirty Christians in Sui-pin, a good number of catechumens and a nice little school run by a Christian. So well respected was the teacher that pagans too, attended the school and so they too learned their catechism.<sup>69</sup>

### **The large and beautiful residence at Ham-kwong and the poor community in Tai-wan**

The following day, Fr Versiglia, accompanied by Fr Pasotti, went back down again to the confluence of the two rivers, and taking the public vessel that went up the Lin-chow river, they reached Ham-kwong which is one of the largest market places along the river. Here the Mission has a large and beautiful residence located amongst a thicket of bamboo and tall camphor trees. The two missionaries spent the Sunday there, consoled by the good number of Christians and catechumens who came. Ham-kwong belongs to the Ying-tak district.

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66 *Lettere a Don Paolo Albera, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.*

67 *Lin-kong-how* literally says: “mouth of the River Linchow”, i.e. of *Siu Pak-kong*, *little Pak-kong*, which at this point flows into the great northern river, the *Pak-kong*; in Mandarin, *Peh Kiang*.

68 *Tsui*, point; *Li-tau* plough, or ploughshare, because that tongue of land takes the actual triangular shape of the ploughshare

69 *Boll. Sal.* February 1922, pp. 38–39.

In the past, the prolonged absence of the missionary had weakened the faith and religious practice of the Christians there. The work of the new missionary had made them fervent once again. A few days before Fr Versiglia arrived, two well-known personages from a town three hours away had come to ask the priest to help them with their religious instruction, because their families wanted to become Christians. Not finding him, they were prepared to wait four days for him.

Then the missionaries reached Tai-wan, where there was a very poor group of Christians who lived on Mission property. Good Christians and hard workers, they did not complain about their poverty, trusting in Providence. Advised beforehand of the arrival of the missionaries, in the evening, after work, they came together in the chapel to pray, go to confession and hear a good word. On the following morning they all attended Holy Mass.<sup>70</sup>

### **The Italian flag flying at Tsing-lin**

When the two missionaries came to the banks of the Lin-chow River to continue their journey, the public vessel servicing the route had already left an hour before ... They covered the next stage on foot across the mountain. After three hours walking they were in sight of Tsing-lin in the Yeung-shan district. The Mission house stood out for more than the usual banner showing it to be the *Catholic Mission, Tin Tchu Tong*, because of a large Italian tricolour which Fr Frigo, who had come from Lin-chow, had raised to celebrate the arrival of Fr Versiglia. There was a warm welcome from the Christian community, and in the evening there were prayers together with these good Christians who were “proud to have us among them” writes Fr Versiglia in his report “and keen to be heard while they were praying by the pagans who were listening in.”<sup>71</sup>

Fr Pasotti gave up his role as guide to Fr Frigo and returned to his district, Ying-tak. Fr Frigo and Fr Versiglia then continued on to Lin-chow.

### **Life on a boat is more tiresome than you can imagine**

“The journey was made in a public vessel” Fr Versiglia writes in his report.

“Life on board these boats is more tiresome than you can imagine. The lowest and narrowest spot means you are normally obliged to remain seated or crouched, or stretched out on a mat. The boatmen and anyone else who needs to move around are up front or at the back, tread on you without saying sorry, and deafen you with their shouting. Added to this for us was a swarm of little flies, hardly visible but they were madly biting you and making you unbearably itchy ... We had been going three days and three nights, and it was thought we would need to stay there for another night, when Fr Frigo’s strategic ability at one point managed to free us. Going up a small hillock he made his calculations: Lin-chow is right behind those mountains: three hours to climb up and two hours to come down. It is three in the morning; by eight we can be home. No sooner said than done: we left the servants on the boat and with a few Christians set off up the slope.”<sup>72</sup>

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70 *Boll. Sal.* March 1922, pp. 70–73.

71 *Boll. Sal.* March 1922, p. 74.

72 *Boll. Sal.* April 1922, p. 94. By night the boat came ashore and remained there. The passengers could also get off, as ours did.

## **On foot to Lin-chow**

“The path was more like a ladder, and very steep” Fr Versiglia continues. “Nevertheless, after spending so long curled up at the bottom of a boat, it hardly seemed real that we could stretch our legs a little. In a little more than three hours we were at the peak. All of a sudden the Lin-chow plain came into view before us. The city rises at the confluence of two rivers and the part surrounded by a wall has the shape of a large rectangle. The walls, about four or five metres high, are so wide that three pairs of oxen side-by-side could walk along them comfortably ...

“The Mission had made great preparations to welcome us, calculating that we would have arrived around noon. They were quite put out when we arrived so early. They wanted to reorganize themselves there and then for the celebrations, but seeing their embarrassment, I thanked them and did not allow them to put themselves out any further. They gave in reluctantly, because they really wanted to show how they could treat their spiritual fathers, and consoled themselves by thinking of some future opportunity to do so.”<sup>73</sup>

## **Missionary successes. Devotion to Mary Help of Christians**

“Interest in the mission at Lin-chow was much more pronounced than when I last visited.<sup>74</sup> I found the house almost constantly frequented by people coming to visit the *Sanfù*, the Fathers, who were now twice as influential. This is due to the activity of our confreres who, like good Salesians, don’t know how to stay still.

“Although not well-versed in the language, they immediately began to approach the children, with whom it is so much easier to make oneself understood. They brought them together, amused them, and gradually attracted other people along with them.

“Devotion to Mary Help of Christians has also picked up in Lin-chow, a consoling development. There was a solemn blessing for the beautiful new statue donated by a generous group of women from the Turin University to Fr Garelli, who then gave it as a gift to Lin-chow, the place where he first worked.<sup>75</sup> Every day without fail the good Christians came to see it. The title *Help of Christians* also makes a good impression on the pagans.

“These poor people, so used to being trampled upon from above and below, feel great relief and satisfaction at being able to speak with such a powerful being as She who out of motherly kindness protects whoever comes to her in faith ...

“I spent three days in the residence at Lin-chow, also to give the Christians an opportunity to recover a little from the cancelled celebrations immediately upon my arrival.”<sup>76</sup>

## **Lui Sanfù’s name day**

“The third day was the feast of St Aloysius (his name day), and they wanted to solemnise it with me. First of all everyone attended the holy sacraments with true devotion. Even some who the

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<sup>73</sup> *Boll. Sal.* April 1922, pp. 95–95.

<sup>74</sup> In March the previous year (1919), when Fr Tzan from the Canton Mission was still there.

<sup>75</sup> There were two statues: one was placed on the altar in the chapel at Shiu-chow, when the Mission was consecrated to Mary Help of Christians. See earlier section in this chapter: The Mission is consecrated to Mary Help of Christians.

<sup>76</sup> *Boll. Sal.* April 1922, p. 96.

confreres told me they had never seen before took advantage of the opportunity to show they were still alive.

“On leaving the church after Mass, I was greeted with a raucous, lengthy burst of fireworks. Nothing of importance happens in China without fireworks: a wedding, birthday, a death, funeral, act of worship, a show of respect, an important contract, the opening of a school, any kind of celebration. Even the beginning of a journey is marked by long bursts of rockets on the public thoroughfare at the hour established by the *bonzi* (monks) or fortune-tellers, even in the middle of the night. Luckily there is a good side to this: the smoke from the gunpowder is a powerful disinfectant against all bad odours.

“That morning, I too had to pass through the middle of this storm, and I believe that even if I was covered in all the microbes from the plague in Milan, with that kind of disinfectant I would have escaped unharmed.

“In the hall, one of the Christians greeted me on behalf of everyone. Then everyone wanted to make the ritual prostration; they then left.

“I was hoping it was all over; but then that evening I saw the same hall full of tables. This was the social dinner. All the Christians ate in Chinese style; however we three missionaries, to our surprise, were served in European style, properly and faithfully.”<sup>77</sup>

### **The official announcement of the elevation to Vicar Apostolic of Shiu-chow**

Two weeks earlier, Fr Versiglia had written to Fr Albera: “There is just one thing I fear, and that various signs make me suspect to my horror and humiliation ... what will happen to our Mission if I remain its leader?”<sup>78</sup>

Among these signs were certainly the warm reception it got from his confreres and the Christians he was visiting.

Bishop De Guébriant, who had granted the Mission to the Salesians and had followed the early developments step by step and knew the whole situation, Salesian and non-Salesian, said when it came to the episcopal consecration of Fr Versiglia:

“The elevation of Fr Versiglia to the episcopate has been something very natural, as if it has taken place by popular acclaim – even the smallest and most tender little children would have acclaimed him as a Father and Pastor.”

These words of Bishop De Guébriant brought a burst of endless applause from the Salesians and all present.<sup>79</sup>

The welcome shown Fr Versiglia in the various mission residences was of the kind given to the Bishop and Father of the Mission. Everyone rejoiced, especially his confreres, who prepared these welcomes enthusiastically. Only he, in his humility, could not understand how he had ended up as the first Bishop of the Mission.

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<sup>77</sup> *Boll. Sal.* April 1922, p. 96.

<sup>78</sup> Letter of 6 June 1920, reported above on p. 175–176.

<sup>79</sup> *Boll. Sal.* May 1921, p. 127.

Official announcement of the appointment reached Lin-chow on 20 June, right after such a fatiguing journey and in the hustle and bustle of receptions. If we had his personal diary, certainly after three disastrous nights on the boat, we would find another sleepless night in the comfortable residence, amid so many people who wished him well.

### **A telegram and a memorable letter**

He quickly sent off a telegram to the Superiors in Turin: “I feel incapable. I beg to be dispensed.”<sup>80</sup> And then he wrote to his friend and confidant, Fr Gusmano, who as Secretary of the Superior Chapter, had sent him the official announcement:

Lin-chow, 20 June 1920

“Dear Fr Gusmano, today I received your letter dated 24 April.<sup>81</sup> Surprise, humiliation and sadness were its results. Perhaps you do not know me well enough to have allowed the Superiors to do this to me?

“The Superiors wanted to show deference to me, give me proof of their esteem ... They have shown all delicacy and kindness. Perhaps they thought it was the right thing to do, because it doesn't seem that they wanted to back a poor and by now elderly man into a corner.

“Now it is up to me to excuse them from all these considerations of delicacy and expedience. Therefore I ask the Superiors to look only at the good of the Mission. It will be sufficient honour and satisfaction for me to have started it off in some fashion; but its future, its development absolutely demand another head and another hand.

“Do not say that I have greater experience of China than anyone else ... Even if that were true I would not refuse to place what little I am at the disposition of the Mission; and in fact this is and always has been my keen desire. So even if I am not at its head, the Mission would lose nothing of what it can expect of me. Furthermore it would have to its advantage the knowledge, virtue and energy of someone else. Even if he lacks experience for now, he will gain it in a few years.

“The Superiors will certainly have already received my telegram regarding this. I intend this letter to be a follow-up to that telegram. I want you to explain this formal request of mine to the Superiors, that is, to be dispensed from the office of Vicar Apostolic and the episcopal dignity that comes from it, while at the same time committing myself to remain in the Mission and do the little that I can on its behalf and in complete dependence on the one who will hold this office.

“I have already written a fortnight ago to Fr Albera,<sup>82</sup> to whom I have expressed the same sentiments, although in a more veiled manner, simply telling him about the rumours that were swirling around. The current letter is a true and formal renunciation in all respects.

“I want you too to help me, out of the friendship that we have always had, and I will be so very grateful for that. Pray for me.”<sup>83</sup>

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80 Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

81 As said above, on 22 April the consistory was held in Rome in which Fr Versiglia had been appointed as Vicar Apostolic of Shiu-chow. On 24 April Fr Gusmano had sent the official announcement.

82 The letter of 6 June reported earlier in this chapter: see ‘A moving testimony ....’

83 *Lettera a Don Calogero Gusmano*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

## **The wonderful Christians at Tung-pì**

“The following day,” Fr Versiglia’s report continues “we left on time to visit the Christian community at Tung-pì where our best hopes are flourishing.”

After describing the poor ground-floor room which was damp and unhealthy and was used as a chapel by more than two hundred Christians, he continues: “It is a desolate but at the same time consoling spectacle: desolate because of the poverty they are in and consoling for the fervour they show. We have experienced the nicest consolations which make us forget that we are in such a wretched setting.

“Already from the first evening many of the baptized came to confession, along with some catechumens asking to be admitted to baptism. While I was hearing confessions, Fr Frigo and Fr Cucchiara were preparing some forty or more of them for their first Confession and first Communion.

“That same evening, after prayers, I spoke to them about the need for and advantages of prayer. In a nearby room, separated only by a wooden wall, were twenty or so pagan girls. They were pupils and hostel residents of the owner of the house. Being a literate man, he was running a school attended by the sons and daughters of the best families from the city and surrounds.”<sup>84</sup>

## **Give us a prayer book as well**

“When prayers were over, the girls, plucking up courage, all came along together and made the ritual reverence, then asked me for a prayer book.

‘But you are not Christians’ I replied, smiling.

“They looked a bit put out. Then one of them replied in a gentle but questioning tone:

‘Since we are not Christians, does that mean we can’t pray to the Lord of the heavens?’

‘Yes you can, but I am afraid you are not serious about it and your parents may not approve.’

‘Don’t be afraid’ the same girl replied. ‘You said this evening that it is not only Christians who can benefit from prayer, because God is the father of everyone. We have decided that if you let us, we will pray to him every evening.’

“We gave them the prayer book, and thanking us, they left.

“We were already in bed and we could still hear those good girls in their dormitory singing our prayers together.

“The following day they went to catechism and asked the teacher, who is a catechumen, to take it as a textbook and explain it. Seeing that I was giving out medals to the children they did not dare ask for one but let it be known that they would like one ... I satisfied them.

“On the final evening of our stay they plucked up courage and came along with the others to the chapel at prayer time; the following morning they came to Mass. The Lord is opening their minds to the light to the point where they may follow the faith.”<sup>85</sup>

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84 *Boll. Sal.* April 1922, pp. 96, 98.

85 *Boll. Sal.* April 1922, pp. 98–99.

## **Where do you want the consecration to take place?**

The joys of the apostolate and his deep spirit of faith had alleviated his dismay somewhat at the thought of the responsibilities of the episcopate that lay before him.

After informing Fr Versiglia of his appointment as Vicar of Shiu-chow the Secretary of the Superior Chapter, Fr Gusmano, had asked him where he preferred the episcopal consecration to take place.

Fr Versiglia replied a month after the appointment, on 19 July 1920.

“From my earlier reply,” he writes “as well as from the telegram I sent to the Superiors, you will have been able to deduce my reply to your other question, ‘Where do I want to be consecrated?’ If it is up to me, nowhere. But if I have to submit, here are my thoughts.

“It seems to me that it is not worth creating too much of a commotion and even less so travel expenses. At any rate, the best thing would be to be consecrated here in a less conspicuous location: perhaps in the Cathedral in Canton when Bishop De Guébriant returns, which should be at the beginning of October I think.<sup>86</sup>

“In this case, however, there will be a slight problem. The Vicars of the other Missions inherit an episcopal range of hand-me-downs from their predecessors. We are talking about the first time there is a Vicar here, so nothing from nobody. We are also completely unable to provide anything of the kind, because even the smallest ecclesiastical item has to come from Europe.

“I recall that in 1916 when I was there, I helped you store away the episcopal paraphernalia belonging to Bishop Parodi, bishop of Sassari. Laughingly you said to me at the time: ‘This will be yours.’ Well then, if the moment has really arrived, keep your word and send me the lot as soon as possible. I am making this request to save time, but let me say it once more: I would be very happy if this could help someone else.

“Pray for me, that the Lord may send it to me in good order!”<sup>87</sup>

## **A serious loss for the Mission**

The official papers for the consecration and the official bestowal of jurisdiction were late in arriving.

In the meantime the Mission experienced another serious loss. Fr Versiglia gave the news to the Rector Major, Fr Albera on 5 August 1920.

“You will already have been informed by my telegram of the grave misfortune that hit us on 27 July: the death of our dear Fr Colombo. As far as we can see, he had already been suffering from various ailments, but as a strong and courageous man he knew how to hide them well so that nobody noticed.”

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<sup>86</sup> Bishop De Guébriant was carrying out the Apostolic Visit to the Missions in China, at the instruction of the Holy See. This visit prepared for the arrival of the first Apostolic in China, Bishop Celso Costantini (November 1922), (Cf. C. Costantini, *Con i missionari in Cina*, Vol. 1., Rome 1946, p. 214).

<sup>87</sup> *Lettere a Don Calogero Gusmano*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.



Having spoken of this sudden death at 37 years of age he then went on to praise the good priest and concluded:

“May the Lord’s decrees be praised. He has not only chosen to take Fr Olive from us, a model of piety and zeal, but has now also called dear Fr Colombo to himself, who as well as being a model of virtue, was a valuable counsellor because of his learning.

“And you, beloved Father, please give further thought to this Mission as dear to your heart as was Jacob’s youngest son Benjamin, in order to fill the gaps that have been created and to tackle new needs like the opening of a minor seminary, an orphanage, a catechumenate, and also, in order not to leave any confreres alone in mission residences that are further and further away from each other we need at least another dozen priests.”<sup>88</sup>

The need for personnel and the serious financial straits are topics that return frequently in correspondence during this period. For Macao and Heung-shan there was a subsidy from the Bishop which left them a little more financially secure; the new mission had no financial resources at all.

### **The Orphanage at Ho-sai**

The need for an orphanage was felt to be urgent by the missionaries as well.

Other than the poor central residence at the New Eastern Gate in Shiu-chow city, the Mission also had an old Chinese house in the suburb of Ho-sai, beyond the river; we mentioned it earlier at the beginning of this chapter. Fr Braga had remained in charge of looking after the Christians at Shiu-chow and Ho-sai, alongside Fr Versiglia.

In September 1920, on their return from the retreat made in Macao,<sup>89</sup> the missionaries met at Shiu-chow with Fr Versiglia, and decided to build the orphanage on the foundations of the old Chinese house in Ho-sai

The fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church occurred that year, declared by Pope Pius IX on 8 December 1870. It was decided to dedicate the new house to him and call it the St Joseph’s Orphanage.

Fr Versiglia included talent as a builder among the many wonderful skills he had demonstrated in Macao. He took it upon himself to prepare building plans and then to distribute various aspects of the construction to local builders. Fr Braga looked for materials and oversaw the construction works. Everyone helped according to his possibilities. The first lot of materials to arrive was a huge boatload of beams and girders sent by Fr Larena.<sup>90</sup>

### **Outbreak of war again. Mission residences become place of refuge**

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<sup>88</sup> *Lettere a Don Paolo Albera, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers. In M. Rassiga, Breve cenno storico*, pp. 87-88 there is a lengthy letter from Fr Stefano Bosio, 30 July 1920, addressed to Bishop (he had received news of the appointment) Versiglia, in which he describes in detail the sudden death of his missionary companion Fr Colombo.

<sup>89</sup> The retreat was held from 5-11 September. It was preached by Fr Versiglia and Fr Canazei. The missionaries left for their Mission on 14 September (*Cronaca di Macao*, p. 101).

<sup>90</sup> *Boll. Sal.* May 1922, p. 120.

The missionaries had barely reached their posts when war suddenly broke out between southerners and northerners. Business was paralysed. Men who were able to work stayed at home out of fear of being recruited as luggage-bearers for the soldiers.

Fr Braga, having left the city for the house at Ho-sai, found it filled with Christians and catechumens who had barricaded themselves inside for fear of the soldiers. Effectively, the soldiers were running around looting whatever they could find.<sup>91</sup>

The following day, returning to Ho-sai to celebrate Mass, he found around a hundred refugees there of every age and condition. They had spontaneously organised themselves wonderfully. He took advantage of those days to get them all to study the catechism under the guidance of the older Christians. The city of Shiu-chow, too, had become deserted in just a few hours: shops closed, doors of homes boarded up. Instead it was flooded with soldiers. One group of ancient pagodas had already been fitted out as barracks.

In a few days the Mission residence was full of refugees of every level of society. They had sought refuge with all manner of interesting and cunning wiles; but they were happy to pack themselves in like anchovies, in the attic, the hen house, in any space they could find, bringing their belongings with them, domestic animals, foodstuffs, valuables and important documents, entrusting the latter to the missionary to keep them in his room. Among the refugees was the entire large family of a Christian mandarin.

Fr Braga assisted the refugees, protecting them from harassment by soldiers and thieves. Despite the precarious and difficult situation, Fr Versiglia continued to go about preparations for building the orphanage, until he was urgently called to help a missionary in trouble.<sup>92</sup>

### **Peace returns. Gratitude of the refugees**

“After two months,” Fr Braga writes in his report “the war was over. The ‘college’ at Ho-sai closed for lack of pupils. Everyone had gone back to works of peace. The chicken coop was full of chickens, geese, ducks donated by people who had enjoyed our hospitality. The Mandarin of Lok-chong wanted to attend the consecration of Bishop Versiglia. As a sign of gratitude for what he had done for him and his people, he donated a magnificent litter.

“Once peace had returned, commerce picked up its normal rhythm again” Fr Braga’s report concluded. “We could finally get the material need to build the orphanage. On 30 November 1920, the first day of the Novena for the Immaculate Conception, work began. It seemed to us that this was an auspicious date.”<sup>93</sup>

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91 *Boll. Sal.* May 1922, p. 120–121.

92 *Boll. Sal.* May 1922, pp. 122–123; June 1922, pp. 153–158.

93 *Boll. Sal.* June 1922, p. 158.

## VICAR APOSTOLIC OF SHIU-CHOW

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### Episcopal consecration

#### And the opening of the Ho-sai orphanage (1921)

#### 9 January 1921

The papal documents arrived and it was possible to establish the date for his episcopal consecration.

Fr Versiglia provided this information to Fr Gusmano on 2 December 1920: “I have received the documents. The consecration is set for the 9th January next. I do not know if the episcopal clothing will have arrived by then. If not, then we will make them out of paper or cloth like Massaia did.”<sup>1</sup>

The consecration was held in the Canton cathedral on Sunday 9 January 1921.<sup>2</sup> The consecrating bishop was Bishop Giovanni Battista De Guébriant, Vicar Apostolic of Canton, assisted by Bishops Domenico Pozzoni, The Vicar Apostolic of Hong-kong, and Bishop Adolf Rayssac, the Vicar Apostolic of Swa-tow. Also present were the Bishop-elect of Macao, José da Costa Nunes, the Superiors of the various Missions Procures of Kwang-tung, and any number of French, Italian, Portuguese, American, Spanish and Chinese clergy and crowds of faithful coming from all over.

The 17 Salesians from the Schiu-chow, Heung-shan and Macao Missions were the soul of the ceremony, looking after the music in collaboration with the *Schola cantorum* from the Macao Orphanage. An *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus* composed for the occasion by Fr Cimatti was sung, along with the Mass in honour of St Joseph by Pagella.

Fr Versiglia had prepared himself for reception of the fullness of the Priesthood through recollection and fervent piety. On this solemn occasion too, he gave proof of his humility.

“Shortly before entering the Canton cathedral for the ceremony of his episcopal consecration,” Fr Braga writes “he humbly asked me for my blessing. I had decided not to agree to this but he knelt down, claiming he would not be getting up until I blessed him.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Lettere a Don Calogero Gusmano*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Boll. Sal.* May 1921, pp. 124-130, report by Fr Sante Garelli to be added to the one by M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 91-92, which makes use of the handwritten House Chronicle in Macao; also the only number published for the occasion in Macao, *Ricordo della Consacrazione Episcopale del primo Vescovo Salesiano nella Cina, Macao 1921*.

<sup>3</sup> *Testimonianza di Don Carlo Braga*, Summ. p. 155.

At the banquet in honour of the new bishop, other than the prelates who had taken part in the liturgical ceremony, the Governor of Kwang-tung, General Chen Chiung Ming, was also in attendance. Despite not being a Christian, he had words of praise for the work that the Catholic Church was doing to lift the spiritual level of the Chinese people.

After the words of esteem for the person of Bishop Versiglia which we have already mentioned,<sup>4</sup> Bishop Dé Guébriant offered warm greetings in words from Genesis: "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads."<sup>5</sup>

Bishop Versiglia replied with gratitude, affection and finesse: "The Canton Mission is not our sister," he said, "but our mother. And you, Your Excellency, are our father ... "

And indeed the Salesian Mission had been detached from the Canton Mission due to the kindness of Bishop De Guébriant who continued to be a father to the Salesians.

### **We are children of a poor father!**

There was also a humorous and soothing touch to that unforgettable day.

At the end of the solemn liturgical function of episcopal consecration the clergy, prelates, two assistant bishops, the consecrating bishop and the newly-consecrated left in procession from the sanctuary.

Fr Braga, who had accompanied the *Schola cantorum* on the organ masterfully and enthusiastically, wanted to end the ceremony with a hymn of praise to the Virgin, Protectress of the Salesian Work.

The hymn that came to mind spontaneously was the graceful and melodious hymn of praise so dear to Salesian tradition: *Salve, salve, pietosa Maria*. He played it on the organ then intoned it at the top of his voice.

However, due to tiredness, or emotion, or the confusion of the moment, it was not the first lines of the first verse that came to him but the first line of the second verse, in a variant with echoes from the verse that followed! What echoed around the neogothic arches of the beautiful cathedral were the clearly enunciated words: *We are children of a poor father*.

Bishop Versiglia, coming down from the sanctuary in mitre and with his crozier, immediately picked up on it. He turned to the nearby group of confreres and Salesian students, and smiling, gave a broad gesture of benediction with his right hand.

The matter was not discussed further on such a busy day.

Only Fr Braga scrambled to apologise for such an involuntary distraction.

But Bishop Versiglia did not forget the episode; and as witty as he was, he mentioned it often as a way of softening a refusal or as one of his frequent acts of humility. Fr Braga would protest loudly that it was an absolutely involuntary blunder. The bishop, cleverly continuing the joke,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Previous chapter and section 'Official announcement of the election...'

<sup>5</sup> Gen 24:60.

insisted that it was a truly solemn proclamation, in song what's more, and on the day of his episcopal consecration, stating that he was a father ... but a poor one!<sup>6</sup>

### **First pontifical in Macao**<sup>7</sup>

He celebrated his first pontifical in Macao, the area where he had first worked. The Salesians wanted to associate it with his silver jubilee of priesthood: and in fact on the 21st of December, a month before, he had completed 25 years of priesthood.

The welcome he received on his arrival in Macao on Wednesday 12 January, was a solemn one, marked especially by great affection and deep gratitude.

As soon as he set foot for the first time as bishop in the well-known house which was the orphanage, while the pupils were waiting impatiently in the courtyard, the bishop was invited to go to the small parlour where the Salesian Cooperators in Macao wanted to render homage and present him with a sign of their respect and gratitude. The room was filled with sacred vessels, vestments, and personal items for a bishop, and everything that would be needed for a pontifical celebration in the best of European cathedrals.

This humble son of Don Bosco, dressed in episcopal clothing whose provenance we have already indicated, felt tears spring to his eyes immediately, and in his deep humility continued to believe that the affection shown him by his benefactors was far more than he deserved.

The Pontifical Mass was held on Thursday 13 January in the city's cathedral, crowded with friends of the Salesian work and other faithful. Beside him was the diocesan bishop, Bishop Da Costa Nunes and the Vicar Apostolic of Hong-kong, Bishop Pozzoni.

That evening and the following day were given over to his sons at the Orphanage; and for him, the good father, they were the most beautiful hours he spent there.

### **Entrance to Shiu-chow. A poor cathedral**<sup>8</sup>

He left Macao on the evening of Friday 14 January, accompanied by some of his missionaries and the Macao Orphanage band, led by Fr Lucas. They stopped over in Canton on 15 January and left once more for Shiu-chow on Sunday 16 January. A breakdown on the railways obliged them to stop for a number of hours, during which the band was able to entertain travellers and local people.

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<sup>6</sup> *Memorie di Don Pietro Pomati*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

1st verse:

Salve, salve, pietosa Maria  
Al tuo trono di gloria celeste  
Uno stuolo di figli vorria  
Il tuo aiuto potente implorar.

2nd verse:

Siamo figli di misera madre (Eva)  
Che ci fa qui languir nell'esilio  
Siamo prole d'un povero padre (Adamo)  
che lasciocci in retaggio il penar.

<sup>7</sup> See the ample description by Fr Garelli, an eyewitness, in *Boll. Sal.* May 1921, pp. 128–130, in combination with M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> Ample description by Fr Garelli, in *Boll. Sal.* June 1921, pp. 153–156, in combination with M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 91–92.

The group arrived in Shiu-chow at 7 p.m. when it was already dark. The group of Christians who had been waiting for several hours had prepared an imaginative light-show with torches and multi-coloured lights. The festive procession moved to the letting-off of firecrackers and the music from the band. The bishop followed, borne triumphantly in a litter given him a month earlier by a grateful soul.

It was an outbreak of joy and sincere affection which made an impression on the non-Christian population. The Christians made up a small flock, but they could not be ignored due to their explosive joy that could only be inspired by extraordinary love.

The entrance to what had to be the ‘cathedral church’ was in jarring contrast with the impressions created in Canton and Macao. A poor, low, narrow, dark little church bereft of everything, its only wealth the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, and lightened by the motherly smile from the beautiful statue of Mary Help of Christians, before which the first missionaries had consecrated themselves and the entire Mission on 24 October 1919.

The *Te Deum* was sung and the bishop gave his first episcopal blessing.

The following day, the confreres and two hundred Christians gathered around him for the first pontifical Mass in the small church, which was without decorations and too small for the number taking part. They stood locked together for lack of space; it was so small that when he came down from the throne in mitre and crozier, he took just one step to reach the altar steps at the centre of the tiny sanctuary. It really did remind one of the Pinardi chapel where the Archbishop of Turin, “coming down from his small chair, had to bend his head to avoid hitting the ceiling with his mitre.”<sup>9</sup> But the Help of Christians smiled down from her luminous throne: “Have faith, be devoted to Jesus in the Eucharist and and Help of Christians, and you will see what miracles are.”<sup>10</sup>

Guided by this faith, the new bishop had taken as his motto: “/In verbo tuo laxabo rete/: if you say so I will let down the nets” (Lk 5:5).

### **Architect and works supervisor**

A few months after his consecration, on 17 April 1921, the feast of the Patronage of St Joseph, Bishop Versiglia had the joy of opening the orphanage in Ho-sai.

He had drawn up the plans and followed up the work with endless patience.

“At first the workers listened half-heartedly if not even distrustfully to the advice and very practical daily guidelines the Bishop gave them” Fr Braga writes. “Then, a little at a time, they were gradually convinced that a wise and prudent man can also come from the West, and they took a keen interest in the recommendations of the extremely patient bishop.

“One day they insisted on changing the plans, because they had never built a two-storey house and failed to understand certain elementary rules of statics (analysis of loads etc.)... It called on all of the bishop’s calm and gentleness to get them to follow the plans in their integrity, except for one small and insignificant change which the bishop accepted to give them a little satisfaction.”

One day,” Fr Braga goes on to say “I found myself by chance with them while they were eating.

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9 MB, II, pp. 429–430.

10 MB, XI, 395.

‘Listen, Father,’ one young thickset man said to me confidentially ‘why are you so involved in the construction works? After all, you are not the one putting forward the money ... Just let things go a bit. Even more so, because with all the effort you are putting in you can see they have not bought you a wife yet ... And does the bishop pay you well? Does he give you plenty to eat? Does he treat you well?’

“His workmates added a few more curious questions. And I burst out laughing.

‘We priests’ I said ‘along with the bishop and the faithful make up a single great society which works for a great reward which we will gain after death in paradise.’

“This time it was they who burst into huge laughter because of my overly weak expectations and utopian hopes.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The first seven little orphans**

On 31 December 1920, the first young orphan arrived, sent by the confreres at Lin-chow, “the most pleasing gift for the heart of the new Salesian bishop on the day of his consecration” writes Fr Braga.<sup>12</sup> He had been staying at the residence at Shiu-chow, the *Sin Tung Mun*, or New East Gate.

Toward the end of March 1921, another two came from Fong-tung ... By 3 April there were seven little orphans.

“Blessed by the bishop,” Fr Braga continues “we unloaded the few household goods the bishop had stripped from his own poor residence, and went down to the confluence of the two rivers at Ho-sai.

“The arrival of the young pupils aroused much curiosity among the workers who were still at work there. Boys began coming from around the district, asking to be accepted as day students at the school. And with the boys came a good number of young girls too,” writes Fr Braga still “neat, clean, dressed in trousers and jacket, hoping to find a place in the large house ... I consoled them by telling them that our Sisters would soon be coming, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who would do for them what we had begun to do for the boys.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The opening of the new institute**

A few days later, on 17 April, the new institute was opened, constructed on the foundations of the old Chinese house. All the Christians and catechumens, and friends from around the district came back to see the new house completely transformed, enlarged, embellished and with two additional storeys besides the ground floor.

“The bishops celebrated Holy Mass in the temporary chapel, as poor as the house at Nazareth” Fr Braga goes on to say. “The altar had milk cartons for vases, and bottles wrapped in red paper for candlesticks. The bishop’s chair was a bamboo stool. The servers were the boys from the orphanage. They had learned the responses in Latin in just a fortnight. Some motets were sung with the help of two confreres who had come for the ceremony.

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<sup>11</sup> *Boll. Sal.* July 1922, pp. 182–183.

<sup>12</sup> *Boll. Sal.* September 1922, p. 233.

<sup>13</sup> *Boll. Sal.* September 1922, p. 234.

“When Mass was over the bishop blessed the rooms amidst the racket from fireworks ... Then the people came through the rooms, all curious and availing themselves of the luxury of going up to the second floor balcony, which they thought was marvellous.

“A rather rotund swine merchant climbed up, not without effort, and breathing heavily with both lungs asked me if I could rent out a room for him up there, ‘because up here you can extend your life by another ten years’ he said.

“When the bishop had left us, he whispered in my ear:

‘But what sort of business is your bishop in? He has spent a fortune to take in poor boys and doesn’t want a penny from them! You can see that this is a mistake! ...’

“I assured him” Father Braga continues “that we had made no mistake because we had inexhaustible treasures in the Providence of God and the hearts of generous people.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The band attracted interest and admiration**

A year later, the orphanage at Ho-sai had eighty pupils and was on a level, for the seriousness of its studies, with other schools in the city.

The band, involving the young pupils, contributed to making it known and appreciated.

When the second missionary group arrived in Macao on 29 September 1919 for the Salesian Mission at Shiu-chow, Fr Versiglia took Fr Braga aside and told him:

“Prepare a list of instruments for a small band. I will immediately order them from Italy.”

“But where are the boys to play them?” Fr Braga had objected. “In the Mission we have no colleges, schools, hospices.” Bishop Versiglia looked at him smiling and replied:

“Have faith and you will see houses and colleges arise and there will be no lack of players for your band.”<sup>15</sup>

And then, as witty as he was, he added, smiling: “Do no fear! Just as Joshua brought down the walls of Jericho with a blast of trumpets<sup>16</sup>, thus will we win many battles and win over many souls at the sound of the trumpet.”<sup>17</sup>

Even when he is joking, we can see the goal Bishop Versiglia always had in mind: “Winning souls for God.” His experience with the band in Macao had allowed him to see that, with time, the same success could be had at Shiu-chow.

“What seemed to me to be a dream then,” Fr Braga would write “is a consoling reality today. The promptness with which the intelligent young Chinese picked up the theory and practice still seems extraordinary to me today. On 7 March 1922 the school opened, and on 17 April, having already learned two small marches, on 28 May, the Feast of the Help of Christians, they made their debut before the public with excellent results.”<sup>18</sup>

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14 *Boll. Sal.* December 1922, p. 326.

15 *Summ.* p. 154.

16 Joshua 6:20.

17 *Boll. Sal.* December 1926, p. 319.

18 *Boll. Sal.* December 1926, p. 319.



Later they had a nice uniform and paraded impeccably through the streets of Shiu-chow, arousing joy, admiration and ever keener interest in the Salesian Mission.<sup>19</sup>

The suburb of Ho-sai, too, felt the beneficial influence of the new institution. Idols and superstitious images in four groups of houses were destroyed, and ancestor's rooms were turned into little prayer rooms where families gathered in the evening to say their prayers and study the catechism.<sup>20</sup>

The catechumens grew in numbers each day. For the Feast of Mary Help of Christians on Sunday 28 May 1922, six orphans received baptism, wrapt with joy and emotion, "mixing their tears of joy with the water of salvation" writes Fr Braga "that made them children of God."<sup>21</sup>

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19 *Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 8, p. 29.

20 *Boll. Sal.* April 1925, pp. 98–99; May 1925, pp. 130–131; June 1925, pp. 156–157.

21 *Boll. Sal.* December 1926, p. 320.

## THE CHINESE REVOLUTION AND BOLSHEVISM

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In order to explain certain past situations, such as the revolution at Shek-ki, the capital of Heung-shan, and the frequent state of war interfering with the missionaries' journeys and work, it would help to sum up the difficult history of China during the time when the Salesians began their work.<sup>1</sup>

### Sun Yat Sen's revolutionary Three Principles of the People (Tridemism)

The history of the revolution which brought about the collapse of the Chinese Emperor and gave rise to the Republic focuses on the name of Sun Yat Sen, known as the "Father of the Chinese Republic". His remains are kept at Nanking (Nanjing) in a magnificent marble Mausoleum.

Sun Yat Sen was born on 12 March 1866 of a peasant family in a village in Heung-shan, Tseui Heung-tsun, halfway between Macao and Canton. Having done his early schooling in his birthplace, he was taken by his brother to Honolulu, Hawai'i, to continue his studies. He was sixteen at the time when his brother, impressed by his precocious revolutionary ideas, brought him back to his native town. But the lad was not happy to remain among uneducated, country people and took off for Hong-kong. Here, in 1884 he was baptised by an American Protestant minister, and married.

In order to give his attention to the revolution, and without arousing any suspicion among local police, he began to study medicine in 1887, first in Canton and then in Hong-kong, where he gained a Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery in 1892. From then on he became known as Doctor Sun Yat Sen, even though he had not completed his studies.

In 1895, after a failed coup against the Manchu Dynasty, he was forced to leave Canton to go abroad to Japan, America, Europa, Siam (Thailand), Malaysia. Wherever he went he spread his revolutionary ideas especially among the Chinese whom he found everywhere.

These ideas can be summed up as the *San-Min-Chin* Doctrine or *Tridemism*,<sup>2</sup> otherwise known as the Three Principles of the People, the program of the revolutionary party which began, in 1905, to have a certain consistency and make its presence felt in China.

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1 Cf. H. McAleavy, *Storia della Cina moderna*, 2nd ed. Milan 1971; Jean Chesneaux, *La Cina contemporanea. Storia documentaria dal 1895 ai giorni nostri*, Bari 1963. A very valuable diary for understanding missionary activity in China from 1922-1933: Celso Costantini, Apostolic Delegate in China, *Con i Missionari in Cina, memorie di fatti e idee*, 2 vols., Unione Missionaria del Clero in Italia, Rome 1946. On Bolshevism and the Salesian Mission in Shiu-chow: G. Cucchiara, *Tre anni di bolscevismo in Cina (1926-29)* Florence 1931.

2 The word was coined by Fr Pasquale D'Elia SJ who translated Sun Yat Sen's book into French: *Le triple demisme de Suen Wen traduit, annoncé et apprécié*, Shanghai 1929. A summary of Sun Yat Sen's doctrine, compared with Catholic Social Teaching, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 18-19 March 1935. Cf. *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, XI (1953), 1521-22, Sun Yat Sen; XII (1954), 515, *Tridemismo*.

The three principles are: *Unity of the people* or nationalism; *peoples' rights* or democracy; *livelihood of the people* or socialism.

These principles took their explosive thrust from factual findings which the contemporary history of China continued to enrich itself from.

The Chinese people needed to free themselves of a threefold oppression:

a) *ethnic*: the Chinese were stationary as a people while other peoples were in constant development; b) *political*: the Chinese people were oppressed by “unequal treaties”; c) *economic*: the Chinese people were being exploited by foreign nations.

These were the driving forces, in the face of clear and often provocative situations, which flowed into strife and revolts, often bloody.

### **The collapse of the Monarchy and the beginning of the Republic**

The *revolution of young Chinese* broke out in October 1911. They were seeking radical reform in China. The Wuchang revolt in Hupeh, on the *Yangtze River* (Blue River)<sup>3</sup> on 10 October 1911, marked the beginning of the new Republican regime. The date is celebrated by Nationalist Chinese as *Double Ten Day*: tenth day of the tenth month, *birth of the Chinese Republic*.<sup>4</sup>

Dr Sun Yat Sen was in Colorado. He hastened back to his country. On 25 December 1911 he was elected as the temporary President of the new Republic, and on the 1st January 1912, he took office in Nanking. The Chinese Republic began its first year of life.

Just as George Washington did after gaining independence for his country, forty five days after his election, Sun Yat Sen resigned from the presidency of the Republic. Wanting to ensure that his revolutionary movement had the support of the army, he abdicated in favour of a military man, Yuan Shih-kai, on condition that the Emperor also abdicate. This took place on 12 February 1912.

Sun Yat Sen could thus dedicate himself totally to the difficult task of the social and moral revolution of one of the largest populations on earth, steeped in a multi-millennial tradition. He expected to spread his doctrine, *Tridemism*, by founding a nationalist revolutionary movement which took the name *Kuomintang*, government by the people. It was aimed at realizing the principle of Abraham Lincoln which lay behind Tridemism: government of the people, by the people, for the people.

But when Yuan Shih-kai died in 1916, the *Kuomintang* was unable to take control of the country. The military leaders, inspired by Sun Yat Sen, had rebelled against the emperor and overturned the throne but in its place they had for all intents and purposes put themselves; and longing to broaden

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3 Wu-chang is located on the banks of the Blue River. On the opposite bank are Han-kow and Han-yang. Together “these three twinned cities” form the grand centre of Wu-han, capital of Hu-peh.

4 There is an interesting on-the-spot impression, we could say, from an Italian missionary in Che-kiang, who in October 1911 was in hospital in Shanghai. After describing the surprise at the news of the occupation of Han-kow on the Yang-tzè River by revolutionaries, and the jubilation of the people of Shanghai and the Che-kiang region where he returned after leaving hospital, he notes: “With regard to Europeans and foreigners in general, Sun Yat Sen’s attitude was one of respect and friendship. he was against the old xenophobic mania of the people and the ruling classes ... as soon as the Troubles arose, republican soldiers came to our missions to protect us from possible assaults by brigands or other criminals. and in fact special delegations came to our bishops with the mandate of assuring them of the friendship and protection from their leaders. Except for a few cases in the more remote inland areas, the missions were not disturbed.” He hopes that China can find regeneration and new life in the Gospel (Fr Giuseppe Basso, *Le Missioni della Cina*, Mondovì 1913, pp. 292–295).

their control they went to war among themselves. The poor Chinese people for whose benefit the Republic had been installed, groaned through civil war and misery.

Sun Yat Sen understood that to make a united nation out of the Chinese people, once the Manchu Monarchy had fallen, they also needed to be free of the warlords. Arms were needed for this, and only foreign nations could provide them.

While the Western Powers, following the war in Europe, had maintained an attitude of superiority and intransigence with regard to China, and continued to demand indemnity for the Boxers, something that had become even more hateful because it prolonged punishment of a generation that was no longer responsible for the serious damage caused, Russia instead raised its Delegation in Peking to the level of an Embassy, and the very able Ambassador Karakan in 1919 not only declared that his government was renouncing the indemnity in favour of Chinese schools, but carried out a very effective propaganda, spreading manifestos on equality, fraternity and sympathy for the Chinese people.

The Soviet Government stated that it was ready for an agreement of friendship and collaboration with the Chinese Republic.

### **The National Government (Kuomintang) aligns with Communism**

In autumn 1923, a Soviet military and political commission arrived in Canton, led by the astute and very able Mikail Borodin. Russia committed itself to providing all kinds of military aid. General Galen (his real name was Vassily Blucher), took on the responsibility for organising the Chinese army on the Soviet model. Borodin would also re-organise the Chinese National Party.

In January 1924, a congress was held in Canton to re-organise the *Kuomintang*. The Communist Party was admitted<sup>5</sup> and a policy of cooperation with the Soviet Union was announced, along with support for the worker and peasant movements.

The bolshevisation of the army quickly began, as well as Communist propaganda among students, workers and peasants.

In the spring of that same year, 1924, Sun Yat Sen founded the Whampoa Military Academy near Canton with the help of Russian military advisers. He entrusted its presidency to the young Chiang Kai Shek, who had been in Russia the previous year to study military arrangements. Political management of the military academy was taken up by another young man, Chou En Lai. The atmosphere in the Academy was so anti-Christian, blasphemous and sacrilegious that a number of the Christians, Catholic and Protestant students, were forced to pull out in order to safeguard their religious faith.<sup>6</sup>

From 27 January to 27 August 1924, Sun Yat Sen held sixteen conferences on “tridemism” (six on nationalism, six on democracy and four on the social question). These were brought together in a book which had unique success in the history of Chinese publishing. Along with the political testament with which Sun Yat Sen left his people, this book became the gospel of the Nationalists.

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<sup>5</sup> The Chinese Communist Party was founded in Shanghai on 1st July 1921, at the first Party Congress. Other than the Dutch Maring, Delegate of the Comintern, twelve Chinese communists took part, representing some fifty party members. Among them were Mao Tse Tung, a twenty-eight year-old at the time, founder of a group from his birthplace Hunan. The Congress was held in the French Concession because the Chinese Communists were under surveillance from the police.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, vol. I, Rome, 1946, 472 pages.

The Nationalist Government claimed that it held solutions to all the problems weighing upon the country.

### **Nationalists and Communists conquer China**

At the death of Sun Yat Sen on 12 March 1925, Chiang Kai Shek took executive power under the title of *Generalissimo* (commander-in-chief) of the armed forces of the South for the unification of China. But the great struggle for national unity and the triumph of nationalism marked the advance and triumph of anti-European and anti-religious Bolshevism in China.

“With the Trojan horse of nationalist claims, Russia spread the virus of Bolshevism in China.”<sup>7</sup> “All the Powers were adverse to this” wrote an authoritative exponent of the Nationalist Republican Government, “and by resisting our legitimate aspirations, threw us into the arms of Russia. In the end we will also free ourselves from the Russians.”<sup>8</sup>

The Nationalists were able to free themselves from the swarm of Russian politicians, instructors and propagandists who were guiding Chinese politics and the armed forces, but they did not free themselves of Bolshevism which had spread among the Chinese people. Chiang Kai Shek, to his ruin, would experience the truth of the Chinese proverb: “You can climb onto the tiger’s back and make a long journey, but then it is difficult to climb back down.”<sup>9</sup>

This is the story of Chiang Kai Shek, of whom the founder of the Republic, Sun Yat Sen, used say that “he was worth an army of a hundred thousand men”.<sup>10</sup> He had to walk alongside the Bolsheviks, putting up with constant hostility and war, at first underhand, then open, which forced him to withdraw to Formosa (Taiwan) under the protection of the United States, while the Communists called him a “brigand and a traitor”.<sup>11</sup>

In June 1926, the Government in Canton conferred full powers on Chiang Kai Shek as commander of the expedition against the North. The revolutionary army, with fifty thousand men, advanced in three columns in July 1926. Borodin personally accompanied Chiang Kai Shek; every regiment had one or two Russian advisers.

The troop advance had been prepared by Communist cadres set up in all the cities. In Hu-nan, the region next to Kwang-tung, where the strongest resistance was foreseen from General Wu Pei Fu, Mao Tse Tung had prepared the people well with Communist propaganda, and strikes broke out everywhere to hinder the progress of the General’s troops, and masses of peasants joined together with the revolutionary forces. The column, which crossed Hu-nan, occupied Han-kow in October, the large city on the *Yangtze* (Blue River), which was the general headquarters of Wu Pei Fu, who had fled to Ho-nan.

The Government in Canton, despite opposition from Chiang Kai Shek, decided to transfer the capital to Han-kow. It was the first great Communist capital. Borodin was the first government adviser of the Communist Party.

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7 Cf. C. Costantini, *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 179.

8 Cf. C. Costantini, *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 396.

9 Cf. C. Costantini, *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 472.

10 Cf. C. Costantini, *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 472.

11 Cf. A. Jany, *Les torturés de la Chine*, Paris, 1958, p. 13.

Incredible things were then seen in the new Communist capital. Not only were churches, hospitals, colleges run by missionaries invaded and destroyed, but the most shameless immorality triumphed.

A diabolical parade of women, dressed only in mother nature, had been planned for 1st May 1927. But at the last moment the government feared the scandal it would have given rise to throughout civil society and called it off. However, since the Chinese newspapers had spoken so much about it as an established event, many people in China thought the parade had really taken place.

We will see that those who attacked our Martyrs would allude in what they said to those scandalous events.

On 24 March 1927, the Bolshevist nationalists reached Nanking (Nanjing). In the early hours of the morning, when the peace of the night still seemed to reign, they attacked missions, churches and consulates. Foreigners were killed simply for being foreigners, and two missionaries because they were missionaries.<sup>12</sup>

The unclean spirit triumphed unforgettably.

Some foreign women were stripped naked. In that state, amid insults and shame, they reached the warships that would offer them shelter (“The Nanking Outrage”).

This was the Bolshevist spirit. But Borodin was blind-sided by triumph; he wanted to put the Chinese Government under the control of the Soviet Government by replacing many individuals then in power with others chosen by Moscow.<sup>13</sup>

### **Break between the Nationalists and the Communists (July 1927)**

Chinese self-esteem was shaken. Chiang Kai Shek rebelled against the Han-kow Government. Taking advantage of the panic created by the so-called *Nanking outrage* and assisted by rich businessmen from Shanghai, certainly afraid of Bolshevism, he set up a new national government in Nanking.

By now his nationalism was anti-Bolshevist. He succeeded in occupying Han-kow, throwing out the Russians, including Borodin, overcoming the militarism in Peking, led by Chang Tso Lin, and re-uniting China under his command (July 1928).

But the Bolshevik army, though beaten, was not destroyed. Core groups of Communist forces remained in many of the provinces. In the Cantonese province one of the leaders was Chang Fat Kwai. He added hatred of Chiang Kai Shek to his hatred of capitalism, foreigners and religion. He saw Chiang Kai Shek as a traitor and the main obstacle to fulfilment of Bolshevist ideals.<sup>14</sup>

In 1927, Chiang Kai Shek was baptised by a Protestant minister from the *Wesleyan Society* and from then on lived his new faith with sincerity. He hoped there would be Christian doctrine as a basis for the restoration of the Chinese State “because” he said “it is the only faith that is complete

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12 Two Jesuit priests: Fr Candido Vanara, and Italian, born in Turin in 1879, and Fr Dugout, a Frenchman.

13 Cf. Testimony of Fr Sante Garelli in *Summ.* pp. 392–394.

14 Cf. Testimony of Fr Sante Garelli in *Summ.* p. 394.

in itself and can communicate to others the moral strength needed to redress spirits and give new life to the Chinese population.”<sup>15</sup>

On 22 January 1929, six months after the setting up of the National Government in Nanking, Bishop Celso Costantini was received by Chiang Kai Shek as Delegate of Pope Pius XI.

“He appeared to me to be a man who stood above the common level” writes Bishop Costantini; “he had the outward reserve and courtesy of the Chinese; but he was quicker and more decisive in expressing his own thinking and immediately showed that he was a leader, a man of clear ideas, and let his energetic will be known to others immediately. ‘I hope’ he told me, ‘that by now friendly relations between our country and the Vatican will increase and the work of spreading the Catholic religion in China will become ever more prosperous.’”<sup>16</sup>

Hatred of religion was added to the Communist hatred of Chiang Kai Shek for political reasons. The struggle between Nationalists and Communists continued for twenty years or more, through many vicissitudes, amid other events such as war with Japan and the war in Europe, and ended with the Communists prevailing, the retreat of the Nationalists to Formosa (Taiwan) and the proclamation of the Peoples Republic of China presided over by Mao Tse Tung (1st October 1949).

### **The situation of the Shiu-chow Mission**

This summary of the history of the Chinese Revolution in the first thirty years of the century will clarify many of the events concerning the Shiu-chow Mission and especially the murder of Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario.

The Shiu-chow region, located between North and South, was always a corridor or a place where troops were stationed in the struggle between Southerners and Northerners, or between Nationalists and Militarists. Generally it was a case of undisciplined mercenaries who committed abuses and carried out harassment: they would stay in private homes and then raid local chickens and pigs. Then the soldiers’ baggage carriers were forcibly recruited from among the men captured. This was followed by the general disappearance of males who were of recruiting age whenever troops came through. The missionary often had to intervene to free some unfortunately captured Christian being dragooned. As soon as there was some rumour of troops coming through, the missionary became the point of refuge for as many as could be taken in, be they rich or poor. Local authorities too were grateful for this asylum.

After the bolshevisation of the army, Southern troops would parade in very disciplined fashion through the streets of Shiu-chow, but the European and especially the missionary would be ruthless targets of xenophobia and Bolshevist atheism. Communism was imposed forcibly on the inhabitants of some parts of the Shiu-chow region, with properties turned into collectives and peasants organised around Soviet models.

Also with regard to the chronic malaise of piracy, which had grown and become far more bold during times of political instability, we need to distinguish two periods. The pirates of old were people who had turned to brigandage due to the injustices they had suffered, cutting them out of society, or because they had been brought to desperation by their wretched state. These people could

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15 Cf. C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, Vol. I, p. 474.

16 Cf. C. Costantini, *Op. cit.* Vol. II, pp. 80–81.

be reasoned with. They had respect for the missionary and knew that in a case of need the Mission doors would always be open, including to them, and they would find refuge. Generally, the sign, “Catholic Mission” on the side of a boat was a safe permit to go through. If the missionary occasionally had problems, it was not to do with him personally but with the people he carried. His bearers were stopped and lightened of their load.

Following the wave of Bolshevism, disbanded Bolshevik soldiers took to piracy, or pirates who had been enlisted and bolshevised then went back to their former ‘occupation’ but with a new spirit full of hatred and already broken in to crime and blood. Bands of pirates had even been organised by the Red Brigade.

It was pirates of this last category whom Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario met on their final journey.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> On Bolshevism in the Shiu-chow Mission cf. the testimony of Fr Sante Garelli, in *Summ.* pp. 394–395; on the revolutionary army’s expedition against the North, cf. H. McAleavy, *Storia della Cina moderna*, 2nd ed. Milan 1971, pp. 309–329



## THE TWELFTH GENERAL CHAPTER

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Final voyage to Italy

1922

### The 12th General Chapter

The Rector Major, Fr Albera, died on 29 October 1921. The Prefect General, Fr Rinaldi, called the 12th General Chapter for 23 April 1922, to be held at Valdocco, to elect the Rector Major and other Superiors, draw up the final text of the Regulations and to bring the Constitutions into harmony with the new Code of Canon Law, published in 1918.

The Superiors had chosen the date for the opening of the Chapter because it was close to the beginning of the month of Mary, and so that the election would be held on the 24th of the month, a day dear to Salesians as the monthly memory of their heavenly Mother. Fr Rinaldi recommended that Chapter members be at Valdocco by 20 April to take part in a triduum in preparation for the event.<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Versiglia took part as the Superior of the Salesian Work in China.

### A model circular for its wisdom, fatherliness and piety

Before leaving for Italy, The bishop sent the Salesian confreres a circular letter which was a model of wisdom, fatherliness and piety. We record some passages from it here because it is characteristic of his balanced and practical spirituality.<sup>2</sup> It is dated 15 January 1922, Shiu-chow.

“Beloved confreres. About to depart for the General Chapter, I feel the duty to thank all of you for the greetings you have sent me, both for Christmas and for the anniversary of my episcopal consecration.

“I would have liked to bring you all together before leaving, to see you once more and say goodbye, but contrary to all expectations the ship I had booked a place on, strangely, left early, so that I was not able to see even some of you.

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<sup>1</sup> *Acts of the Superior Chapter*, Year 2, no. 13, p. 312.

<sup>2</sup> Archbishop Celso Costantini, later Cardinal, described him as: “Typical of the missionary bishop”. See ahead, Chapter 23, second last section, ‘The Apostolic Delegate in China ...’ Some twenty days earlier, the bishop had sent the Chapter Moderator, Fr Luigi Piscetta, his suggestions for topics to be dealt with, regarding missionary personnel. Cf. *Lettera a Don Luigi Piscetta*, 28 December 1921, in Arch. Sal. 9, 3; Vers.

“This is no small concern to me because I believe that not a few of you would have had many things to say, and maybe I would also have been able to clarify some of the many difficulties we meet everywhere ... I hope that your prayers will accompany me, not only during the voyage but also during my stay, so that it may be truly useful for the Mission. For my part I assure you that I carry you all in my heart and will present you to Jesus daily, asking him to support you in your work and in your difficulties. I will certainly not forget you when I arrive at the feet of the Virgin Help of Christians, near where our three deceased Superiors lie, and at the feet of the Holy Father.

“I have received the most consoling and wonderful news from the various districts and have reason to believe that the Lord blesses your efforts. There is an increase in the number of catechumens everywhere, and this is most consoling. Baptisms, too, over these first few months, have almost exceeded the number throughout all of last year.

“We certainly have to thank the Lord; but at the same time it demands much greater and more serious care on your part.

“By now each one is beginning to really feel the concerns of spiritual fatherhood. On the one hand this is quite consoling, but on the other it imposes considerable obligations, both in our regard and with regard to our spiritual children.

“First of all the duty arises for us to increase our spirit of piety and attachment to God, things that we should absolutely also infuse in these regenerated children of ours, or children yet to be regenerated. This infusion of the spirit of piety, love of God, interest in matters of the soul is not achieved simply by knowledge, nor with external effort, but by possessing within us such virtues and to such a degree that they can easily be transfused in others.

“Secondly, since our spiritual family is growing, we need to arm ourselves with a great spirit of patience, kindness and foresight. Earthly fathers know how much patience is needed for the education and formation of their children ... How much more patience we need to form adult individuals whom we had never known or seen before yesterday ...

“My dear confreres, this is something I have experienced and I believe you have too: none of us likes to be rushed into things and much less the Chinese ... The system of St Francis de Sales and Don Bosco, which is our beautiful legacy as Salesians, will certainly triumph in China too. Hence we must be vigilant over our natural keenness, studying how to remain always calm and balanced.”

He then goes on to provide some rules concerning the catechumens, rules full of balance and wisdom, the result of a decade of experience. “It is necessary” he writes “for the catechumen first of all to destroy idols and superstitions, show commitment to study and doctrine, and show that he or she gives practical testimony to Christian life.”

The letter then speaks about the length of the catechumenate. One gains the impression that one is hearing the venerable rules of the most ancient ecclesiastical tradition.<sup>3</sup>

### **Broad agreement among Chapter members**

There was admiration among those who came for the Chapter for Bishop Versiglia and broad agreement concerning his outstanding gifts: the ability he had shown in setting up and developing

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<sup>3</sup> Two circulars of Versiglia's, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

the Salesian Work in China, his apostolic zeal, often mentioned in the *Salesian Bulletin* news items, the outstanding virtues he had demonstrated since his earliest years of Salesian life, his candidness, cheerfulness, sincerity, cordiality and welcoming approach. Add to this the fact that he had known Don Bosco personally.

“A few” says one of those present “saw the possibility that he could be elected Superior. One of the more authoritative among those taking part in the Chapter mentioned this to the Moderator, Fr Luigi Piscetta, a man universally admired for his theological knowledge and prodigious memory. With his habitual kindly and penetrating smile, he limited himself to responding that someone already incardinated into the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy did not seem to him to be able to be elected as Superior.”<sup>4</sup>

Fr Philip Rinaldi was elected as Rector Major. The Chapter lasted 17 days and there were 24 sessions. On 4 May, all the members of the General Chapter went to Don Bosco’s small cottage at the Becchi. Bishop Versiglia celebrated the community Mass and Cardinal Cagliero gave the homily. During the cheerful dinner at Castelnuovo, there were toasts in every language: it began with the Provincial of the United States, Fr Manassero,, then in Piedmontese, and ended with Bishop Versiglia in Chinese.<sup>5</sup>

### **A propaganda tour for the Missions. A significant letter**

Once Chapter sessions were over, Bishop Versiglia began a cycle of conferences to make the Salesian Work in China known and to collect donations. As well as Italy, he was in Spain, France, Switzerland and Germany, and everywhere he won extraordinary acceptance and sympathetic interest.

Something that certainly opened the hearts and purses of so many people was the nobility of intention and the outstanding gifts of Bishop Versiglia which we have seen widely testified to by fellow students, pupils and confreres.

But behind these human gifts lay the foundation of supernatural virtues which were the fascination of this man of God.

Among the sixty five testimonies sent along in 1940–41 by companions and pupils of Bishop Versiglia, I will offer the complete letter from Fr Giuseppe Ghibaud, dated 21 April 1941.

“I have just a few personal memories of Bishop Versiglia,” he writes “but I very willingly offer them to you for the great esteem and gratitude I have always had for him.

“In 1893-1894 he was my assistant at the novitiate at Foglizzo.

“He was still a cleric, and among the Superiors, after the Rector Fr Bianchi, he was the most respected, the most loved for his kindness, prudence and Salesian joviality.

“His was a spontaneous and dignified demeanour, but not aloof. Always smiling and jovial in recreations, he adopted a serious manner, but never grim, in school and during assistance.

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<sup>4</sup> *Memorie di Don Emanuele Manassero*, p. 15; cf. *Memorie di Don Alfredo Savoia*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>5</sup> A photograph with the names of all the participants in the 12th General Chapter, in the *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*, published by the *Ufficio Stampa Salesiano*, Turin 1969, pp. 232–233; on p. 291 the elected members of the General Chapter with the Rector Major, Fr Philip Rinaldi.

“I saw him again only 28 years later, in 1922, at Verona, when he was already a bishop. I was the Rector of the Salesian Institute there and fully taken up with building the technical school. I invited him to celebrations on the occasion of the *Display* by our technical courses, which lasted for ten days.

“He gave a number of conferences with slide projections in the Institute’s courtyard, to everyone’s satisfaction.

“I recall his patience in putting up with the inconveniences of our poor house, which did not have the comfort it has today, and especially in putting up with the nuisance of the mosquitoes. We did not have mosquito nets. I met him in the morning after the first night he spent with us, his whole face where his luxurious beard did not cover it, covered in red spots from the mosquito bites.

“I begged forgiveness on their part! He suggested I extract their teeth for the coming nights, but offered no complaint. He then expressed how grateful he was to me and the confreres for the hospitality and for the poor donation we were able to collect for the Mission. I then never saw him again.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Children baptised at the point of death**

One of the topics the bishop gladly touched on in his conferences, was one of the scourges that impressed him most, seeing babies left to die out of a lack of humanity or because of superstition, and who were then baptised by the missionaries.

Already on the ship which brought him to Italy he had received a substantial sum of money from a lady travelling with him: “Bishop,” she said to him “the Lord will soon bring joy to our house with the smile of a baby. I want it to have two protectors in heaven before birth. Take this sum of money and call one baby Pierino and another Maria from among those the missionaries collect and baptise at the point of death.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Generosity of good souls**

“During the vast propaganda tour,” Bishop Versiglia writes “I met, in cities and villages, hearts that were sensitive and generous. I saw myself surrounded by friends and brethren who wanted to collaborate with us and who were enthusiastic and zealous propagandists for the missionary ideal, munificent and outstanding benefactors of our works, generous to the point of heroism.”<sup>8</sup>

Acts of heroism bursting forth from the inherent goodness of hearts animated by Divine Grace, but certainly also because of the charm of the missionary bishop. He had paid dearly in person through his sacrifices and bore in his demeanour and expression the features of a man of God.

In Milan, at the end of one of his conferences, a lady who had followed it all and was very moved by it, caught up in the overwhelming desire to give something immediately, and not finding

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<sup>6</sup> *Memorie di Don Giuseppe Ghibauda*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>7</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1923, p. 63, article by Bishop Versiglia titled «Risveglio di simpatie per la causa delle Missioni» (Renewed interest in the Missions).

<sup>8</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1923, p. 65.

anything in her purse, took off her diamond ring and slipped it into the bishop's hand with a gesture of the most intense satisfaction.

“One day I was preaching in the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians in Turin” writes Bishop Versiglia. “A lady who was moved by the account, put her hand instinctively into her pocket and drew out a note. The conference continued and the devout woman put her hand in her purse and added a second note to the first. I continued with my talk describing the Mission's works and the consoling results we had gained from them. I was following the good lady with my eye as she began searching through all her pockets; she collected things together and began counting. When the conference was over she followed me into the sacristy and gave me all she had: two twenty-five lire notes, a number of tens, others of five, two and even one lira. The total was a hundred lire.”<sup>9</sup>

“One day one of Bishop Versiglia's former pupils was present at one of his conferences. They had not seen each other for sixteen years. At the end of the conference he came up to him:

‘Can I also make an offering?’ he asked.

‘Thank you. I know you are working; certainly it will be the fruit of your sweat and savings.’

“He drew out some money from his wallet and handed over five hundred lire notes.

‘For me? ...’ Bishop Versiglia interrupted him, hesitating.

‘Yes, for you ... Don't be surprised; it is money I give with interest; and the interest is that I expect the Lord's blessing on my family.’”<sup>10</sup>

### **Promoter of the missionary vocation**

With his personality, pastoral zeal, the charm of his personal holiness, Bishop Versiglia aroused admiration for the missionary and the desire in young people to become one.

In Milan, one of the pupils at the Salesian Institute there offered him a fine sum of money, the result of the savings and acts of mortification of members of the Missionary Association set up among the students.

“Bishop,” he said, “we want someone to follow you to China. We cannot do so yet. Meanwhile, accept our savings and baptise one of those children whom the missionaries turn into angels at the point of death, so that he can obtain missionary vocations from our Institute.”<sup>11</sup>

“Even abroad,” writes Bishop Versiglia “I have seen many cases of unspeakable kindness. Usually those for whom life is difficult are more ready to understand the needs of others. I was visiting one of our festive oratories in Spain to celebrate Mass. At the end of the liturgy I addressed some words to the eight hundred young urchins there. As soon as I left the church, a child came up to me, his clothing all tattered and shoes coming apart. He took my hand, kissed the ring and secreted a small coin in my hand. Two *centavos* his mother had given him to buy his breakfast with. This small donation brought me to tears.”

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<sup>9</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1923, p. 65: To gain an approximate idea of the value of this amount, you need to multiply by three hundred, also keeping in mind that 'per head' income at the time was less than today, meaning the people had less money. (This evaluation was approximately valid in 1970).

<sup>10</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1923, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> *Boll. Sal. Ibid.*

“In the evening, during a short conference on the Missions, all the children at the oratory came around and collected the wonderful sum of thirty *pesetas*. My dear confreres, they were the poorest boys in Barcelona.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Going without breakfast to give a donation to the Missions**

Again in a Salesian Institute in Spain where the bishop had given some conferences, the sacristan noted that one of the day students had been furtively hanging around the donations box for the Salesian Missions for a few days, and when no one was looking, dropped some things in.

The Rector, who was curious about this, surprised him at it one day:

‘What are you doing?’

‘Nothing’ stammered the boy ...

‘What did you drop into the donations box?’

‘A coin.’

‘But how can you make a donation each day to the missionaries if you are so poor?’

The boy went red in the face; he then confessed that he brought along each morning what his family had given him to buy his breakfast with.

‘Don’t you feel hungry?’

‘I try to distract myself from that and not think about it.’

In fact he was one of the more lively boys, always active.<sup>13</sup>

### **In France among the workers, and at a hospital**

At Lorena, Bishop Versiglia spoke one evening to a group of Italian workers. The following morning, one of the good workers from the steel mills came to him to apologise for not having attended the conference because it was his shift to work, and nor could he attend the following evening at the conference for the French group because it was his shift again. But his workmates had told him what the conference was about, and their impressions of it, and he had come to make an offering.

“My people at home,” he began timidly “have very different ideas to mine. Ask the Lord to convert them.”

He kissed his hand devoutly and gave him his donation: two hundred franc notes.<sup>14</sup>

In one French city, the bishop was invited to visit patients in a hospital there. He saw each one and showed them so much charity and kindness that he drew their admiration and they were very

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<sup>12</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1923, pp. 65–66.

<sup>13</sup> *Boll. Sal.* March 1923, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> The French franc and the Swiss franc at the time were on a par with the lira in Italy. As we said above, to get an idea of the value one needs to multiply by more than three hundred. (Valid in 1970).

moved. At no one else's bidding they hurried around to collect a donation. This time too it was a fine amount: a hundred francs.<sup>15</sup>

### **An apostle who drew his strength from his habitual union with God**

The generosity of hearts, moved by Christian charity, but also the fascination of men who have given everything to God and their neighbour and can certainly ask others for something.

Fr Tommaso Nervi, who as a young aspirant in 1894 had known cleric Versiglia at Foglizzo for a short time when he was assistant to the novices and teacher of philosophy, writes:

“I saw him again 28 years later in Madrid when he came there with Bishop Comin in 1922 for a mission propaganda tour. He left an impression on me that I will never forget: the impression of the true apostle who drew his strength from the spirit of recollection and a habitual interior life.”<sup>16</sup>

“During his stay in Italy,” Fr Braga writes “Bishop Versiglia was invited by the Bishop of Como, Bishop Alfonso Archi, to take his place administering Confirmation in various parishes of the diocese. He left such an impression of kindness and apostolic zeal that in 1929–30, when I was going through those same parts of the diocese, I still heard them telling me:

‘Bishop Versiglia is a saint.’ and when I mentioned him during the homily, you could immediately hear a whisper of approval and pleasure from among the faithful.”<sup>17</sup>

### **The return to China**

Bishop Versiglia was absent from the Mission for almost a year. In Italy he had won much interest and sympathy: a number of confreres, especially young clerics, had offered to follow him to China. Among these was the cleric Caravario. But most were not in a situation to be able to carry out their intentions. When the bishop left Italy there were just two confreres with him, one a learned priest but an older man who could not adapt to the climate, the other a Coadjutor who found it very difficult to adapt.

Instead, he brought with him the first group of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, long-awaited in China, to begin to do among the girls what the Salesians had done successfully in the orphanage at Macao and then at the orphanage in Shiu-chow.

A somewhat terse telegram from Fr Rinaldi “The Sisters will be coming”, had cheered up the Provicar, Fr Guarona and a good group of girls already attending a Mission school which we will speak about in due course.

On 23 January 1923, the bishop wrote from Brindisi, sending a simple postcard to Fr Rinaldi: “This evening, 23 January, we will embark and depart almost immediately. All well so far. We have visited the confreres in Bologna, Faenza, Bari. We have had the warmest of welcomes. In Brindisi the Sisters were well accommodated with the Franciscan Sisters of Egypt who have opened a house here to look after missionary Sisters. We all offer you our filial greetings.”<sup>18</sup>

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15 *Boll. Sal.* March 1923, p. 66.

16 *Memorie di Don Tommaso Nervi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

17 *Testimony of Fr Carlo Braga*, *Summ.* p. 157.

18 *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

## **Brief stopover in Bari**

The Rector of the Salesian Institute in Bari was Fr Federico Emanuel, a companion of Bishop Versiglia's at the Oratory in Valdocco and in the Novitiate at Foglizzo, who later became a Bishop. On 18 February 1941, he wrote:

“I was particularly impressed by the visit Bishop Versiglia made at Bari when I was the Rector there. He stayed with me for two days before sailing from Brindisi. He was almost always with the boys, speaking to them in the church and in the study hall, arousing the missionary apostolate in them. The pupils, enthusiastic about his ardent words and exquisite kindness, offered him everything they could, be it money and prayers. He said goodbye to us with an affectionate embrace but not without a veil of sadness, almost an omen telling us we were not to see him again.”<sup>19</sup>

## **Arrival in Hong-kong. Bitter disappointment**

More than a month later, on 9 March, the Bishop wrote to Fr Rinaldi from Macao:

“We have finally arrived after a voyage of fifty days, forty-five of them at sea. In general we have arrived well, without incident except the length and consequent boredom of the voyage. Both we and the Sisters were brave sailors.

“In Hong-kong some of the confreres were waiting for us and others in Macao. I leave it to you, beloved Father, to imagine the very sad impression they gained from the observation of how few missionaries we were. Tears came to their eyes. They were caught up in complete disappointment. For the moment we had to calm them down by suggesting the hope of coming reinforcements.

“So I beg you to act in such a way that promises become reality as soon as possible. Only this way can we lift their morale which has dipped somewhat.

“I have found that in general things are going well. The news they have given me is good and consoling. But I do see a very noticeable decrease in the health of the missionaries. If we do not come to their aid I fear that some might succumb.”<sup>20</sup>

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19 *Memorie di Mons. Federico Emanuel*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

20 *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.



## TWO YEARS OF TOUGH MISSIONARY WORK AND SUFFERING

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1923–1924

### **Mary Help of Christians School**

When the Orphanage in Ho-sai opened in April 1921, with a school for both boarders and days students, Fr Braga saw a sizeable group of young girls appear asking to be enrolled. He softened his refusal by giving them hope that the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would come just for them.<sup>1</sup>

The hope that the Mission could have a girls school was actually realised before the Sisters arrived from Italy, and it prepared the way.

In December 1919 a lady came to the Mission headquarters in Shiu-chow. She was a good Christian. With her was another young woman in her thirties who, at the other's suggestion, had destroyed all her idols and asked to study Christian doctrine.

The missionary allowed the young woman to take a copy of the catechism, inviting her then to come to the Mission for explanations from the catechist.

To the missionary's surprise, she opened the book and quickly began to read the characters and explain them; she asked if she could study it herself. She was a teacher who had gained her diploma at a Protestant school. They wanted to force her to embrace their religion. She had refused and opened a small private school at home.

As she gradually studied the catechism, the Lord's grace worked on her soul. She took part in the religious ceremonies in the Mission chapel which at times were also run by the girls. The missionary noted that she worked well with them and was very devout when she was at the beautiful statue of Mary Help of Christians.

She asked to be baptised. She had to wait a year, during which she gave excellent proof of the practice of Christian life. At Christmas time in 1921, Bishop Versiglia administered baptism to her and her eight year-old daughter. The mother took Lucy as her name and the child Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 12, section entitled 'The first seven orphans'

Ten or so days later, at the beginning of January 1922, while the bishop was getting ready to leave for Italy to take part in the Salesian General Chapter, the young teacher came to him, and told him that her pupils had grown in numbers and that in the coming school year, beginning in February, it would no longer be possible to host them in her small house.

“Could you not open a school at the Mission?” she asked. The bishop replied that he would think about it. The answer was positive. A room was prepared in a month and on 1st April 1922 the new school was opened. The 80 pupils at Ho-sai also came to the celebrations and cheered everyone up with their singing.

So the girls too now had a school, and it was called Mary Help of Christians school.

The pupils from the city wore their school uniform with pride. The girls at the girls school in the Mission, about thirty of them, chose a Greek cross with the writing “Mary Help of Christians”. So, the cross went through the streets of the city and into many pagan houses, preparing the way for grace.<sup>2</sup>

The first group of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians arrived in China in March 1923. They were accommodated in a house prepared for them at the beginning of the year in the serene tranquillity of Ho-sai, near the St Joseph’s Orphanage. There they waited for a few months undertaking the serious study of Chinese. They were consoled by the children from the suburb running to them. On Sundays, girls from the school in town also came to find them, the school that had taken the name of their heavenly Patroness, Mary Help of Christians.<sup>3</sup>

### **Amid the hardships of war**

In 1922, during the absence of Bishop Versiglia, work in the Mission became very difficult due to the reigniting of hostilities between North and South. The Shiu-chow region was constantly troubled by troop movements and their devastation, sowing terror among the people and they were a real scourge in the country, cities and villages.

The city of Shiu-chow was literally invaded by soldiers for a fortnight, occupying shops and private homes, taking no notice of remonstrations by the citizens, and in fact using violence against those who opposed the occupation. One family who lived near the Mission residence was forced to leave their home and take refuge with relatives in a nearby suburb, so that their daughters would not have to live with twenty or so soldiers who had occupied the home.

There was general panic. Both the residence at Shiu-chow and the orphanage in the suburb of Ho-sai were full of Christian refugees or friends.<sup>4</sup>

“On the evening of Sunday 7 May 1922, in less than half an hour,” writes Fr Braga “more than a hundred men took refuge in our orphanage at Ho-sai, because of the sudden and bestial hunt for carriers and the stealing from homes and hen houses. I do not hide the fact that the sudden influx of so many tenants brought serious hardship to the already numerous orphans living here.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Boll. Sal.* October 1922, pp. 266–267.

<sup>3</sup> *Boll. Sal.* July 1923, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> *Boll. Sal.* October 1922, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> *Boll. Sal.* February 1925, p. 45.

On 12 July 1922, the city was at the centre of a furious firefight. On 21 July skirmishes continued in one or other part of the city.<sup>6</sup>

Even the departure of the troops from the city brought its own woes. It was a struggle where soldiers were trying to grab carriers for their luggage: peasants, merchants, professional people, all without distinction were forced to pay by using both feet or to pay a princely sum to gain exemption for that.<sup>7</sup>

### **The annual report for 1923**

Not even the second half of 1922 and all the following year were tranquil. Here is how Bishop Versiglia puts it in his annual report, written on 8 December 1923.

“The region of Pak-kong where our Shiu-chow Mission is found was, throughout this year and still is at the moment, one of the main theatres of war between the North and South of China. Some districts, like Nam-yung, Chi-hing, Lin-chow and Yeung-shan, were taken then retaken at least seven times by enemy factions, with the consequent looting and stealing every time an army was forced to retreat, and the imposition of enormous bounties any time another army managed to enter.

“As if that were not enough, bands of pirates, taking advantage of the inevitable anarchy, grew to such an extent that the poor people were not safe anywhere and in many districts no longer dared to leave home, not even for urgent work in the fields, and we will see the results of that unfortunately this coming year.

“Once those beasts in human form would at least leave the women in peace; now not even these are respected but are indiscriminately rounded up and taken as hostage, and if they are not redeemed within a certain period, they are sold to other countries.

“So this year our missionaries were in a constant state of alarm, constantly running from one place to another to use their peaceful influence in an attempt to save now a village, then a group of Christians or a family; at other times to lighten unjust demands; or again, to console and infuse courage in people under the constant nightmare of serious threats.

“This work of disinterested charity on behalf not only of Christians but pagans as well, can only bring valuable results over time. Already we have noticed a great increase in the respect shown to the missionaries and a current of ever-growing sympathy toward the Catholic Church.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Mission work is at a standstill**

Some months after his return from Italy, on 18 July 1923, Bishop Versiglia informed Fr Rinaldi of the situation we have spoken about:

“I would like to give you really good news but such news is scarce at the moment.

“Mission work is almost at a complete standstill because the region is in almost constant upheaval from war.

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<sup>6</sup> *Boll. Sal.* November 1922, p. 292.

<sup>7</sup> *Boll. Sal.* October 1922, p. 265.

<sup>8</sup> *Annual reports*, Year 1922-23, Arch. Sal. 9, 5, Vers.

“In some places the confreres are reduced to shuttling between Generals, officials and mandarins to free some catechumen taken unjustly or to protect some maltreated Christian, or to mitigate some of the overly severe measures.

“Certainly this work is also charity; but the work of ministry, preaching and religious propaganda has almost completely stopped.

“I add the state of health of the confreres: their health is so disturbed that I fear there will be irreparable consequences ... I was certainly not making an exaggerated request when I asked for the help of a dozen or so individuals. If we delay much longer, I fear we may have to replace everyone.”<sup>9</sup>

Two months later, on 14 September 1923, he confirmed this news:

“I regret having to confirm the news in my last letter, given the increased aggravation of more political abuses in the region, the consequent piracy which makes our work extremely difficult and with little reward for it, at least at the moment. On the other hand I unfortunately also have to confirm that the health and strength of the confreres is diminishing drastically.”<sup>10</sup>

### **A delicate and painful situation**

We need to speak now of a real situation we find reflected from then on in his letters to Fr Rinaldi. It was the thorn that accompanied Bishop Versiglia’s apostolic activity and was the crucible in which his zeal for souls, spirit of sacrifice, humility, his attachment to the Congregation and submission to the Superiors reached the limits of heroism.

Some imprudent and ill-informed rumours had given the Superiors the idea that the confreres in the Mission at Shiu-chow were discouraged because their work and labours were fruitless. And this was happening because they were not working in the spirit of Don Bosco in the Mission.

One letter of Fr Rinaldi’s to Bishop Versiglia on 8 September 1923 had to be an echo of these rumours. We do not have it in our possession but we can know its contents from the lengthy reply the bishop delayed to write for three months or more. It was written on 28 December 1923.

### **The confreres in the Mission are as good as anybody**

Above all, the bishop defends the good spirit of his confreres: “I feel I need to state and maintain” he writes “that for their steadiness of character, spirit of piety and sacrifice and for the spirit of Don Bosco, the confreres in the Mission are as good as any confreres working in the houses I visited while in Italy, Spain, France and Germany ... Confusing exhaustion and loss of physical strength due to overwork and fatigue with simple discouragement or moral dejection, is not something one can do simply, especially for my part, since for some four months I have been nurse to one or other of the confreres.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> On the care the bishop showed for his sick missionaries see further on - testimony of Fr Carlo Braga in Chapter 21, section entitled ‘A power went out of him’

Here he lists the confreres whose health has been declining, but who continued to drag themselves around with an enormous spirit of sacrifice. He then goes on to say: “Perhaps discouragement could play a part ... But what I can say is that the most serious symptom of discouragement began when they saw me return from Italy without any of the help they expected ... Once people see their hope of any assistance cut off, and all they can hope for in a few years is a trickle ... discouragement drastically increases.”<sup>12</sup>

The two expressions “in a few years” and “a trickle” need some explanation. Unable to send personnel prepared for Missions under considerable development, the Superiors had decided to send young novices from Italy to do their Novitiate in the Missions as well as their preparation for priesthood and religious life while they acclimatised themselves to the place.

A group of aspirants was sent to Shiu-chow too, beginning their novitiate in January 1924.<sup>13</sup> But they could only be of some assistance to the missionaries a dozen or so years later.

Besides, in June 1923, a Religious Superior was appointed whom Salesian personnel in Macao depended on, as well as the Mission at Heung-shan and the Apostolic Vicariate in Shiu-chow. The Vicar Apostolic had to look to him for personnel, when and if he would send them.<sup>14</sup>

Bishop Versiglia was always very respectful of this Superior even though he would confess that he “had sometimes contrary ideas.”<sup>15</sup>

## **The method of evangelisation**

In his response to Fr Rinaldi’s advice to “organise the Mission according to the spirit of Don Bosco”, Bishop Versiglia touches on the method of evangelisation.

The missions in South America had been the first ones. They were a kind of model for missionary work and presented a grand model in the person of Cardinal Cagliero.

China and Japan were a totally different field. There in South America the gospel had to be brought to people who were still at the level of basics and who received the gospel along with civilisation; here instead it was a question of evangelising peoples who had developed, who had a civilisation that went back for a millennia or more, one they were proud of, considering it superior to the culture of the missionaries.

There were no *en masse* conversions in China. They happened on a one-on-one basis after a long and gradual work of convincing individuals, which demanded regular and continuous work by the missionary.<sup>16</sup> Christian groups that had already been formed often fell back into indifference because the missionary was absent for too long.

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12 *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

13 See section further on in this chapter, ‘Novitiate and studentate ...’

14 The China Viceprovince was canonically erected on 1st January 1923. Arriving in Macao on 9 March 1923 after taking part in the General Chapter, Bishop Versiglia provided news of this (Cf. House Chronicle, Macao, p. 156). The Superior, Fr Ignazio Canazei, took up his role in June 1923 and made his first visit to the confreres working in the Linchow River valley in August-September. (Cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 71 and 94).

15 Letter to Fr Rinaldi on 4 January 1930. On Bishop Versiglia’s relationship with Religious Superiors and the Holy See, cf. Summ., pp. 132, 136-137, 172-173, 185, 287, 303-304, 313-314, 320-321, 428-429.

16 In a letter to Giuseppe Canonica on 8 December 1929, Fr Caravario wrote from Lin-chow in quite expressive terms: “Far from fishing with a net, here one fishes with a hook, one-on-one, for the souls the Lord sends us.” (*Letters to Giuseppe Canonica*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav.).

“The Mission is just beginning” Bishop Versiglia went on to say in the same letter of 28 December 1923. “The essential need for many years yet is for men who evangelise in the strict meaning of that word. When there are a sufficient number of Christians all the other works that are part of the system of Don Bosco will then develop including the theatre; yes, even this, which started in Macao like a mushroom and has been there now for some years with great success.”

The Mission was structured like a diocese: individual mission residences took the place of parishes. First there was a need to evangelise the pagans one-on-one and form the Christian community, and then the typically Salesian works would develop within that: festive oratory and college, with *teatrino* and colleges, and a band. Bishop Versiglia had already put these things in place in Macao and would later do so at Shiu-chow.

In the last part of the letter quoted, mentioning the theatre, we hear the response of someone who felt that he had discovered the panacea of the system of evangelisation in the theatre.

### **Lack of personnel**

“The problem, then, of this poor Mission, besieged in every sense,” the bishop concludes, “must not be sought in the lack of the spirit of Don Bosco, nor in the confreres, nor even in organisation, but only and solely in the lack of personnel. A remedy? Sending efficient personnel already formed in every sense, who can immediately share the hardships with those who are already here and which are imposed by the duty of being a missionary. Then we will see the morale of the confrere lift.”

The letter we have reported here was written on 28 December 1923. An echo of this painful situation is also seen in a report to the Apostolic Delegate, Bishop Celso Costantini, on 9 January 1924.

“May it be heaven’s wish” writes Bishop Versiglia “that Don Bosco’s educational system can bring its humble contribution to the evangelisation of China. I would certainly like, by way of experiment, to establish the Salesian work in our Mission in all its extension and effectiveness. But who knows what I can do with only sixteen individuals, a good number of them in very poor health? We have only three thousand Christians but at least four million pagans to evangelise, some colleges to look after, the seminary to establish, catechists to form. How can we do something good that is organised and consistent? I continue to bombard the Superiors ... I am not talking about material means: we are wholly dependent on Providence. Our funds come from Mass offerings and the spontaneous charity of benefactors. Unfortunately both are visibly dwindling.”<sup>17</sup>

In a letter to Fr Rinaldi on 21 February 1924, Bishop Versiglia says some things that sum up and make the situation very clear: “What has saddened me up till now and still breaks my heart is to see that I still fail to make the needs of this poor Mission understood. As a consequence the confreres continue to suffer and good is being lost.”

This last comment expresses a father’s heart, anguished because the confreres continue to suffer and wear down their health, and it testifies to the zeal of the apostle, saddened for the good that is being lost because there is no one to continue the work that has been begun and carried forward with so much sacrifice.

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<sup>17</sup> Celso Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, Vol. II, Unione Missionaria del Clero, Rome 1946, p. 170. On Bishop Costantini and the first Chinese Council, see further on in this chapter, section entitled ‘The first Chinese Council’

This will be the heartbreak that will accompany the bishop in his tough missionary work. Sometimes, out of humility, he would attribute the lack of success to his lack of ability or virtue, and entreat the Lord's help with extraordinary penances.

### **The ideas of two saints always converge**

The different perspectives on missionary work which we see emerging in Fr Rinaldi's letter, could have meant there were two contrasting approaches. But guiding them were two saints. There was a common force moving them both: ardent love of God, stripping away of all personal interest; and the goal was also common: bringing about the kingdom of God.

The two positions would converge in a marvellous way thanks to the deep humility, great love of God and the Salesian Congregation of Bishop Versiglia, and to Fr Rinaldi's fatherliness. They were two people in love with God, two saints. We will see this by examining their correspondence in the years that followed.

In the concrete circumstance of being a religious and a bishop, responsible before God and the Holy See, for a number of years the bishop would add new and personal suffering to the rigours of missionary life which would refine his spirit in the practice of virtue to a heroic degree.

For his part, Fr Rinaldi would follow, step by step, the difficult journey among thorns, until it ended in martyrdom. After Bishop Versiglia's glorious end, Fr Rinaldi told Fr Braga: "Bishop Versiglia's cause of Beatification could be introduced even without the aura of martyrdom."

Fr Braga agreed with the Rector Major's words and was moved by them. He later referred to them at the tribunal examining the cause of Beatification of the first two Salesian martyrs.<sup>18</sup>

One person who was with Bishop Versiglia from 1923 to 1930, testifies: "I can testify that Bishop Versiglia as bishop knew how to obey the directives that came from the Holy See and at the same time knew how to comply with the directives coming from the Superiors of the Congregation., He had that ability to marvellously reconcile his situation as bishop with that of being a Salesian missionary."<sup>19</sup>

### **In union of prayer with the Carmel in Florence**

In spring 1923, Bishop Versiglia got in touch with the Carmel in Florence, asking for prayers for his Mission. It is a lofty letter which mirrors the ascetic nature of a saintly soul.

His first letter to the Carmel was 21 November 1923, between the letter from Fr Rinaldi, which we have already mentioned, and the reply from the bishop on 28 December. We sense the inner echo of the painful situation.

"Reverend Mother and Sisters in Jesus Christ, I believe I have made a real scoop through the agreement made with the Carmel in Florence. This way we will have behind us people to support us, help us and encourage us in our work. We will have people who will make up for our squandering and will sanctify our meagre work, our wandering lives, our risks, our difficulties. We

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<sup>18</sup> *Summ.* p. 169.

<sup>19</sup> Testimony of Sr Elena Bottini, *Summ.* pp. 303-304.

will have people who will bring effectiveness to our words, our efforts, our concerns, our anxieties. We will also have a comfort in our painful moments of loneliness and isolation. In those moments, and unfortunately they are not few, the thought that we have our dear Sisters far away and hidden from everyone, but very close to us, hearts that beat in unison with ours, who pray with us, suffer with us and offer themselves as victims for us, will be a precious salve for our poor hearts.<sup>20</sup> He could not have painted the situation reverberating in his soul any better: the tough work of the missionary apostolate, wandering life which was common to all his missionaries but to him especially, the loneliness and isolation which were an inner torture in his soul, the need to know he had secure backing in the prayer of holy souls and hearts that beat in unison with his.

### **A great joy amid suffering: one hundred and eight baptisms**

1923, which had brought more than one thorn with it for Bishop Versiglia, ended with an event which was of great consolation to his apostle's heart.

Ho-sai had been for Shiu-chow what Valdocco was for Turin. The orphanage, which began amid great poverty with seven pupils in April 1921, had been gradually increasing in number and quality. Don Bosco's system had worked miracles among the Chinese too.

“Whoever observes these children while they are praying” wrote Fr Braga, their Rector “is forced to exclaim: ‘These are not children, they are angels! A dozen or so want to become priests and study Latin.’”<sup>21</sup>

At times of danger due to violence from soldiers, the orphanage had hosted around a hundred people in addition to the pupils, finding refuge there.<sup>22</sup> The school at Ho-sai, also attended by day students, was well-known and liked in the city and surrounds. Its band had aroused curiosity and admiration.

Next to the orphanage was the old house of the *Kuneong* (consecrated virgins, catechists) and a new two-storey house accommodating the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in March 1923.

The Salesian missionaries, the *Kuneong* and then the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had made inroads with the good population of market gardeners from the surrounding district. As noted earlier, Fr Braga had gone on a number of occasions to destroy family idols of people who had asked to study the catechism. On the Feast of Mary Help of Christians, 1922 a solemn ceremony took place in three of the surrounding villages, replacing the idols with a picture of Mary Help of Christians. There were more than a hundred catechumens being instructed by the missionaries and the *Kuneong* in 1922 and then in 1923, also by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.<sup>23</sup> At Christmas in 1923, Bishop Versiglia had the joy of administering baptism to a hundred and eight adults.

“This was a memorable date and solemn feast” writes one of the Salesians present “in which our good father could embrace such a substantial number of regenerated children to the life of grace at

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<sup>20</sup> *Lettere al Carmelo di Firenze*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>21</sup> *Boll. Sal.* September 1924 p. 233.

<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 11, section entitled ‘Outbreak of war again ...’; also in this chapter, ‘Amid the hardships of war ...’

<sup>23</sup> Annual report by Bishop Versiglia in the *Boll. Sal.* June 1924, p. 155.



the end of a year so filled with very touch trials such as the war, constant harassment and sickness among a few of the missionaries forced to abandon their apostolic work.”<sup>24</sup>

The ceremony was held on the last Sunday of Advent and on the Tuesday, Christmas Day, in St Joseph’s Church, opened on 7 October this same year, next to the orphanage.<sup>25</sup>

The Bishop felt tears welling up when he saw this group of a hundred and eight men, women and children lining up in front of him, regenerated by grace, and who were coming to receive their first Holy Communion from his hands. But they were tears of joy. He could hear the words he said every week when saying the Divine Office:”Those who go out weeping, carrying seeds to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.”<sup>26</sup>

### **The bishop evangelises the poor**

The work of evangelisation of the rural population around Shiu-chow and Ho-sai continued in the years that followed.

“Bishop Versiglia treated not only the Christians but also the pagans with great warmth and familiarity” writes Sr Elena Bottini from the first group of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who came to China and was then Provincial. “I recall him going to Ho-sai where there was the greatest number of Christians, going from house to house to visit families and dealing with them all with great kindness and friendliness.”<sup>27</sup>

“At some times during the year, especially, in preparation for the feast of Christmas, in the evening, after the farmers had returned from work in the fields, the Bishop took us Sisters with him, some catechists, and took us to the home where the peasants lived. While he and the male catechists instructed the men, we Sisters and the female catechists tried to instruct the women in the Catholic religion. It was truly moving to see the holy bishop going before us through the rice paddies, with his lantern, leading us to the peasants’ homes.”<sup>28</sup>

“On the way we would say the rosary, and on the way back, almost always by the light of an oil lamp, we would say evening prayers,” adds Sr Giuseppina Testa.<sup>29</sup>

“Undoubtedly the apostolic labours of Bishop Versiglia and his helpers bore good fruit and there were many conversions” Sr Bottini continues. “But unfortunately, already in those years (1924–26) we noticed the first infiltrations of Communist propaganda presenting the Christian religion and foreign and passé, causing some sad defections, especially in the peasant community who were more ignorant and more exposed to the violence of Communist threats.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Pastoral visitation to districts. A disastrous return from Nam-yung**

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24 *Inter Nos*, photocopied edition, no. 7, p. 19, on 30 December 1923.

25 Missionary Fr Vincenzo Bernadini had passed on the legacy left him by his deceased parents, to build the church.

26 Ps. 125:6.

27 *Summ.* p. 302.

28 *Summ.* pp. 301–302.

29 *Summ.* p. 358.

30 *Summ.* p. 302.

The anguished letter to Fr Rinaldi on 21 February 1924, already mentioned earlier, was written during the few days the bishop spent at Shiu-chow, between his visit to the districts on the north-east (Nam-yung) and the visit to districts in the west (Lin-chow). The visit to Nam-yung lasted a month, including the return trip which was disastrous.

The bishop himself describes it in a report to the *Bollettino Salesiano*. We will quote some passages.

“Frequent lack of transport,” he writes “pouring rain, falls from the horse on impossible paths, forced fasting and walking in the rain ... these are the usual ups and downs of our journeys.

“The inclement weather forced me to spend some days in Tong-fong-tow to the immense joy of the Christians who felt re-invigorated by our presence. In fact that area is completely infested with pirates who engage in all sorts of misconduct there ... A few days before our arrival, they had beaten a poor old woman.

“The section from Nam-yung to Fong-tung was more disastrous than the earlier ones: hail, mid-February, crunched against our clothes, face and neck, beating us without mercy. There was nowhere we could take shelter.

“Suddenly the horses stopped dead and would go neither forward nor backward. We spent half an hour shivering and sighing. Finally the clouds lifted and we slowly descended on foot, dragging the horses behind us. We were not walking but sliding. Thanks God we arrived at Chin-kong by evening.

“A good Christian family welcomed us with respect and warmth. We changed clothes, they prepared supper for us, while the head of the family happily remembered the bishops he had welcomed there and to whom he had offered sweet home-made rice wine. The younger son got up at midnight to wash and prepare our clothes.

“The day afterwards we were in Fong-tung, welcomed by those good mountain-dwellers with much festivity. There was no lack of work and the results were consoling: more than a hundred Communions on Sunday and about twenty confirmations. The weather had improved a bit.

“We set off again on horseback. At Chi-hing we looked for a boat but couldn’t find one at any cost: they were all hidden up the small tributaries of the Pak-kong, so as not to be taken by the soldiers. We were forced to follow the river to find a track that every now and again got lost among the bushes and rice-paddies. The rain continued without pause. We spent the night with a pagan family happy to look after some Europeans and more so missionaries.<sup>31</sup>

“By chance, because we were on the final stretch separating us from Shiu-chow, we came across desert and desolation: towns burnt or destroyed by gangs of soldiers who for more than a year, in raids between Canton and Kiang-si, sowed terror and desolation. There were no longer signs of life. We found no one who would give us a cup of tea or a little rice.”

## **Pirates as well**

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<sup>31</sup> This would no longer be the case after the bolshevisation of China when the xenophobic movement and the anti-religious struggle had spread.

“Our bearers had stayed a little behind. On the outskirts of Tai-kiu they were attacked by a dozen or so pirates. Pointing their revolvers and shaking their fists at them, they forced them to give up their baggage. Other than our personal things, they also carried a crozier, the only one I had, and other items destined for our missionary exhibition in Turin. The poor fellows were stripped of everything, even the little money they had. They were forced to beg for alms along the road. They reached Shiu-chow the following day, hungry, exhausted and still shaking with fear.”<sup>32</sup>

## **Suffering**

*Inter Nos* gives news of his arrival with some touching details:

“A small group of confreres gathered around him with affectionate concern. He was unrecognisable. He got down from his horse but was so tired he couldn’t walk. His jacket was wrapped around his waist, his raincoat was splattered with mud, boots likewise covered in mud, his beard was whiter, his face emaciated. He went up to his room, and while he was having a snack he told us some of his romantic adventures, the dangers he had escaped, the good achieved, hopes for the future and his discomfort at seeing how few personnel were in those districts, while the harvest was so abundant.”<sup>33</sup>

The 15<sup>th</sup> February came; on the 21<sup>st</sup> he wrote the letter mentioned above to Fr Rinaldi. To the discomforts and roughness of missionary life there were more acute, more painful inner sufferings added.

## **Visitation to western districts**

On 25 February 1924, the bishop set out once more on his pastoral visits. He went to the district of Lin-chow and on his return stopped over in Yeung-shan and Ying-tak. It was a month of very laborious journeys by boat or on foot, sometimes running along behind his own boat on the riverbank, like the boatmen do, often spending the night on the lower deck of the public boats amid the racket made by the boatmen, or in lodgings he happened to come across, with discomforts of all kinds. In the various residences there was intense apostolic work, the joys of pastoral ministry and the consoling testimonies of the keen faith of the Christian people.

On 19 March 1924, the bishop wrote from Ham-kwong:

“We also spent four days in Yeung-shan – myself, Fr Boccassino, Fr Beniamino and Fr Cavada. In Ki-tam especially, we preached a kind of mission with a consoling number of men and women. Over these days there were almost always general communions and the youngsters showed how fervent they were ... The boys from the school (more than thirty of them, some pagans among them) all know how to lead the prayers. Some asked to learn how to serve Mass ... At Ki-tam we also had eight baptisms of adults and many confirmations. Over the days we spent there, a number of heads of family came from nearby towns to ask us if they could become Catholics ...

“We left Ki-tam on the morning of Saturday 15 March in a Christian boat, and arrived in Ham-kwong. Throughout the voyage one could say it was like being in a chapel while on the boat: in fact

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<sup>32</sup> *Boll. Sal.* December 1924, pp. 320-321, Cf. *Inter Nos*, no. 11, 1924, copied (literally, hectographed).

<sup>33</sup> *Inter Nos*, no. 11, 1924, copied (literally, hectographed).

we celebrated Mass there, prayed, preached, administered the sacraments. The good Christians took turns at rowing and at the tiller, so everyone had a chance to take part in the holy Mass, Communion and prayers. How beautiful it was to hear the sound of their strong voices as it mixed with the gentle lapping of the waves breaking against the river bank! ... In the late evening, when we arrived at the place where we would stop<sup>34</sup>, our Christians, as soon as they saw a group of boats, would unfailingly go and anchor in their midst. After having arranged everything and gulped down their meagre meal in haste, they were impatient to begin singing their prayers. They already knew that at the sound of their melodious singing the pagans would be peeping out from their boats, and also people in the village. In fact in these circumstances some of the more daring ones would jump onto the boat and enjoy the novelty more comfortably.

“It is a good opportunity for the missionary to speak to those people about the good God. We did not let the opportunity slip. The good people listened to us attentively and with interest. I am convinced that if we had someone who could go there frequently and cultivate these good seeds sown, there would be no lack of good fruit ... But the harvest is great and the labourers are few!”<sup>35</sup>

The bishops returned to Shiu-chow on 25 March, exactly a month after he left. He took part in the feast of the Patron of the orphanage at Ho-sai, delayed so that the bishop could take part, and gave the ritual blessing to the new church bell (the church was attached to the Institute and dedicated to St Joseph). It was the first bell to ring out in the heavens around Shiu-chow; that day it rang almost incessantly to the admiration of the good people of the town and surrounding area.<sup>36</sup>

### **Visitation to north central districts**

Tuesday after Easter, 22 April, the fourth anniversary of his appointment as Vicar Apostolic of Shiu-chow, Bishop Versiglia left for a visit to the districts in the central north, Lok-chong and Yan-fa.

Here too there was no lack of difficulties and adventures. He speaks about them himself in a report to the *Bollettino Salesiano*.

“On the Tuesday following Easter,” he writes “we left for Tong-tong, although everything seemed to be conspiring against our journey. No litter, no bearer. My horse had died the night before, and we had to set out on the trip on foot, trusting only in the help of Providence. After four hours of walking we met Fr Barberis, but his horse, too, was unserviceable because of a large wound on his back. We covered some fifty kilometres on foot. Two hours away from our destination when we were really feeling the tiredness we finally met two young people sent by Fr Foglio, with two horses for us. We set off again on horseback. But during a steep descent the horse I was on spooked, I don’t know why and began to trot, then gallop, running into two small buffalo he met on the track. Although an experienced rider, I could not stop him. I then recommended myself to Mary Help of Christians, checked where I was and then leapt from the saddle, just tearing my clothes a little, thanks be to God, over the shoulder.

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34 At night the boats stopped beside the river bank.

35 *Inter Nos*, no. 14, 1924, copied; cf. *Boll. Sal.* December 1924, p. 322.

36 *Inter Nos*, no. 13 and no. 15, 1924, copied.

“Finally we saw Fr Foglio and some Christians coming to meet us and we went on with them to Tong-tong. On our entrance, all the faithful met us with warm greetings and the inevitable fireworks. They surrounded us with warmth and filled the little chapel.”

The bishop continued to highlight the positive side, the fruitful pastoral ministry in each residence, the keen faith of the people there and the open involvement in preaching of the word and the sacraments.

He finishes his report by highlighting the scarcity of means, the poverty of the residences and the need for benefactors to cooperate in the work of evangelization.

“The expenses the Mission has to meet each year,” he concludes “are more than what we have. We trust in Divine Providence. since we are dealing with the salvation of souls.”<sup>37</sup>

Apostolic motivation, the salvation of souls are always at the forefront of the holy bishop’s concerns.

### **The first Chinese Council**

In November 1922 the first Apostolic Delegate to China, Bishop Celso Costantini, arrived.

Bishop Versiglia was in Italy. As soon as he arrived home he wrote from Shiu-chow on 30 March 1923:

“ ... For some time now we have felt among the Vicar Apostolics the need to have a direct representative of the Holy See here nearby in order to coordinate and unify our forces for evangelisation of this huge pagan nation more easily under his guidance. So I can do no less than show my great satisfaction for your arrival and the hope that your presence among us missionaries marks the beginning of a new era in the apostolic conquests we all yearn for. The Salesian Mission is small and poor and the last to arrive, so it cannot contribute much to realise Your Excellency’s plans. But if it can be of some value just the same, you can also count on us. We are all at your disposal.”<sup>38</sup>

One of the main tasks of the first Apostolic Delegate was to get ready for the Council.<sup>39</sup> His arrival in China had been preceded by the apostolic visit made by Bishop De Guébriant, Vicar Apostolic of Canton, an old missionary with outstanding personal qualities and consummate experience. His long absence from Canton had delayed the consecration of Bishop Versiglia. In contacts with the bishops and missionaries throughout China, he had been able to discuss the problems raised by the Encyclical *Maximum Illud*, published by Benedict XV on 30 November 1919. It is the Magna Carta of the Missions and contains the fundamental principles for reforming the missionary approach. The report sent by Bishop De Guébriant to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith was the first guideline for the new Delegate, about to leave for China, on problems in the missions there. To address these problems the first Council had been called.<sup>40</sup> Bishop Versiglia had the joy of taking part in it.

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<sup>37</sup> *Boll. Sal.* December 1924, pp. 321–323.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, Vol. II, Rome 1946 p. 170.

<sup>39</sup> C. Costantini, *Op. cit.* vol. I, pp. 3 and 161.

<sup>40</sup> C. Costantini, *Op. cit.* vol. I, pp. 2–3.

It opened on 15 May 1924 in the church of St Ignatius in Zi-kawei, suburb of Shanghai. Bishop Costantini, as Papal Legate, presided at the opening, celebrating the Pontifical Mass in the presence of the Council Fathers. There were 42 bishops, 5 Prefect Apostolics, The mitred Trappist Abbot, representatives of a further 13 missions. There were also representatives of a number of Missionary Religious Institutes in China, and from the Chinese clergy.

“Personally I felt humbled, small, confused before these venerable bishops” writes Bishop Costantini. But I knew that though I personally counted for little, they recognised the great prestige of the Papal Legate; and that gave me confidence.”<sup>41</sup>

The Council closed on 12 June 1924 in the church at Zikawei with the solemn consecration of China to Our Blessed Lady. The Fathers signed the Proceedings of the Council placed on the high altar.<sup>42</sup>

The official dinner, offered at the conclusion of the Council by Christians in Shanghai to the Fathers and Chinese authorities, was held in the rooms of the St Joseph Hospice of Comm. Lo Pa Hong. It was just a few months before the Salesians came to open a technical school there: among them was cleric Caravario. Bishop Versiglia had begun negotiations between Comm. Lo Pa Hong and the Superiors in Turin and they had arrived at a good point.

On return from the Council Bishop Versiglia stopped over for a day in Macao on 24 June, and ordained Salesian confrere Fr Pamio among the joy of his sons who were always happy to have him back among them, even if it was late to be wishing him the best for the Feast of St Aloysius. He reached Shiu-chow on the evening of 26 June.<sup>43</sup>

## **Missionary work in 1924**

At the end of August 1924, in his report to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, Bishop Versiglia summed up the missionary work for the first eight months.

“Disturbances from war and piracy” he wrote “not only continue, with the consequent worries for the missionaries but have increased appallingly. Certain regions have indeed become impenetrable. In others, though one can risk a European priest, a local one cannot go there because he would run the risk of being captured and taken prisoner. One of the *kuneong* (consecrated virgins, catechists), was taken prisoner last January. She managed to free herself with great difficulty and only after six months.

“Hence work has become more difficult for the missionaries. As well as their apostolic ministry they have to replace the catechists for instructing individuals and groups. Given the need, they have taken on this extra work generously, carrying out what St Paul said: ‘But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the good news of God’s grace’ (Acts 20:24). With real pride I take this opportunity to give you this public acknowledgement of my confreres.”<sup>44</sup>

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41 C. Costantini, *Op. cit.* vol. I, p. 161. The complete list, with Superiors, Bishops, Delegates and Prelates unable to participate and essential news of the Council can be found in L. Wei Tsing-Sing, *Le Saint Siège et la Chine*, Paris 1968, pp. 109-117. On pp. 256-257 there is a photograph of those taking part in the Council with the names of each one.

42 C. Costantini, *Op. cit.* vol. I, p. 163.

43 Macao House Chronicle, pp. 179-180.

44 Annual reports, 24 August 1924, Arch. Sal. 9, 5, Vers.; *Boll. Sal.* March 1925, p. 70.

In this “public acknowledgement” of praise for the sacrifice the confreres were making of their own lives, following St Paul’s example so that the Gospel may be proclaimed, we hear the echo of the echo of the repeated hints to Fr Rinaldi regarding the confreres’ work despite their poor health, and of his open and frank defence of their good spirit.

## **New works**

He then lists the works being done at the centre and in the districts. We will just mention some of the main ones that were achieved this year.

At Ho-sai the institute for the *kuneong*, Chinese consecrated virgins, preparing to be catechists for the women in the mission. In 1924 there were around twenty of them.

In Shiu-chow city, the girls school we have already mentioned, now under the care of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, had become a proper boarding school and day school, although the lack of classrooms forced them to limit the number of pupils to around fifty.

The Salesians only had the old Chinese house in the city at *Sin Tung Mun*, (New East Gate), the Mission headquarters. Some time ago, however, they had bought a large piece of land, where the mandarin centre had been earlier, so they could adapt it to new buildings. But there were objections from the government in Canton, and they were only able to take possession of it after intervention from General Chen Chiung Ming, who had become a friend of the Salesian Mission when he took part in the episcopal consecration of Bishop Versiglia.<sup>45</sup>

Work on the large construction which was the Don Bosco Institute, built according to the drawings and with the help of the bishop, took all of 1923 and part of 1924. The opening took place on 6 July 1924, in the presence of the Italian Consul from Canton, the Mandarin of Shiu-chow, civil and military authorities, with a large representation from schools and corporations in the city.<sup>46</sup>

The fact there was now a technical school for the children of the people brought applause from everyone.

“We need your workshops” said the Mandarin of Shiu-chow: “every workshop you open for the Chinese people will mean one less prison, one less band of pirates, one less guild of those disastrous, lazy intellectuals of ours who learn from foreign universities the worst of other cultures and forget the good culture of our their own country. We can only bless you for this.”<sup>47</sup>

The Don Bosco Institute had a section for working boys, a technical section teaching printing, tailoring and shoemaking; and a students section with lower and upper primary (seven year course) for boarders and day students; a catechists school, a catechumenate for young people. A small group also began to study Latin and were the core of the future seminary. Later a teachers course would be added.

Some months later, on 1 November 1924, a beautiful church dedicated to the Sacred Heart was opened. It became Bishop Versiglia’s modest cathedral. He also lived at the Institute.

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45 The land was bought and paid (\$2,500) to the mandarin of Shiu-chow in 1919. The document for transferral of the property from the Canton Treasury could only be obtained in June 1921 through the action of the aforesaid General. (*Inter Nos*, Year VII, no. 5, p. 2; *Boll. Sal.* October 1922, p. 265.

46 M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico* etc. p. 152.

47 C. Costantini, *Con i missionari in Cina*, Vol. I, Rome 1946, p. 181.

A year later, on 5 August 1925, the foundation stone was laid for its twin Institute run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for the girls. Bishop Versiglia also drew up the plans for this and looked after the construction work. It was opened on 28 January 1926. The girls classes already begun at the old Mission residence transferred to the New East Gate.<sup>48</sup>

### **Salesian Novitiate and studentate at Ho-sai. The Bishop's "canons"**

In January 1924 a small group of prenovices arrived from Italy to make their novitiate in China together with some young Chinese.

They were accommodated at Ho-sai in some small rooms behind St Joseph's church. They began their novitiate on 29 January, the Feast of St Francis de Sales.

In summer of the same year, pupils from St Joseph's College in Ho-sai transferred to the new large Don Bosco Institute in the city and the house at Ho-sai became the novitiate and studentate for Salesian religious.

Bishop Versiglia went there to give some conferences to the novices and it was always a great joy for them to listen to him.

On feast days, the novices used go to Shiu-chow for the liturgical services in the church attached to the Don Bosco Institute which also functioned as a cathedral. The bishop called them "my canons", a title which the young novices were very proud of. He dealt with them with great familiarity: just as he used to do with his missionaries, also explaining to them the problems of the Mission, as though they would be able to help him solve them, and he let no opportunity slip to give them some good advice and assist them in their formation.

On 5 August 1925, when the foundation stone for the Institute of Mary Help of Christians for the girls was laid,<sup>49</sup> the bishop wanted "his canons" to be part of the ceremony, and as important people, to put their signature on the parchment that was kept inside the stone.

Constant joviality and amiability amid the laborious work of the apostolate and suffering, and the continuous signs of respect and affection he gave others, bound the hearts of everyone together.

One of the "canons" of that era, speaking about this episode concludes as a testament to him: "Knowing Bishop Versiglia meant loving him."<sup>50</sup>

This sympathy and sincere affection for the bishop was felt at every level, but especially among the young. Flipping through *Inter Nos* we find frequent notes like the one that follows:

"29 March 1926: after a month's absence, the bishop arrived by train at 9 p.m. from Lin-chow. The boys, having finished evening prayers, were heading for bed. as soon as they heard about the bishop's return they ran into the courtyard and gave their bishop a warm welcome."<sup>51</sup>

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48 A description of the opening ceremony was in *Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 7, p. 26. Bishop Versiglia showed particular skills in seeing to the architectural drawings and supervision of pretty much the entire building construction in the Vicariate, as we have seen above for the orphanage at Ho-sai. There were a good number of buildings erected. Yet out of humility he used say jokingly, in reference to himself: "Those with money build; those without just do the plans."

49 Cf. *Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 7, 15 March 1926, p. 25.

50 *Memorie di Don Pietro Pomati*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers. at the end of August 1925, the perilous situation of war led to the transferral of the novitiate to Macao.

51 *Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 8, p. 32. The bishop left for Shiu-chow on 25 February 1926 (*Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 6, p. 24 ). It was the last pastoral visit to Lin-chow. The one begun on 24 February 1930 was interrupted on 25 February at Li Tau Tsui by his martyrdom.



## THE FIRST WAVE OF BOLSHEVISM

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1925–1926

### Annual Report for 1925

The annual report for 1925 that Bishop Versiglia drew up on 1<sup>st</sup> October that year hints at new difficulties not mentioned in the past. We have spoken of these earlier when presenting a summary of the history of China in the first thirty years of the century: the outbreak of xenophobia and the bolshevisation of China.

“The province of Kwang-tung” the bishop writes “seems to be at the mercy of spasmodic internal upheavals and attacks, invasions and oppression of all kinds from outside. Our mission, being on the borders of three other provinces, Kwang-si, Hu-nan and Kiang-si, as well as suffering all the internal miseries, has also become the natural passageway for all the hordes who, either out of a desire for conquest or just looking for booty, head for Kwang-tung, or, if they have been defeated, retreat there.

“Newspapers speak of abuses, extortion, devastation; they publish massacres and imprisonment ... And the poor people suffer, powerless to speak up. Entire populations are reduced to terrible famine.

“The missionary is forced to run hither and thither constantly to be able to save some, especially when Christians are at stake.”

He then quotes a number of cases where the missionary’s intervention was able to save a group of Christian prisoners from pirates, or an entire population who had taken refuge in the mountains after their villages were plundered, and risked dying from hunger and hardship. The mediations of another missionary had brought peace between two groups of soldiers from different factions involved in extortion in the countryside and who were threatening the lives of the people.

### Xenophobia and atheism

He goes on to speak about another kind of difficulty, one of morals.

“What I have mentioned thus far,” the bishop goes on to say “and many others we will let go for now, demonstrate the difficulty of our work. But these are not the worst. Others have been added this year, matters of exceptional gravity which, in some places, have completely paralysed our work.

“One I will mention above all others. It has been brooding for some time but has now exploded with violence we have not seen before. It is the feeling of antipathy toward the European and anything that is foreign.

“Not that such a feeling is natural for the Chinese. Far from it! The Chinese people of themselves are the most peaceful, quiet and hospitable people you could imagine. In fact they are a people who are keen to know almost anything new and to be instructed about it. But brazen troublemakers, especially among the student class, are trying to circumvent this in all sorts of ways: committees, parades, rallies, speeches, proclamations, press, caricatures, trickery, lies, intimidation ... All this creates anything but a favourable atmosphere for us.

“Now it seems the devil has been unleashed: huge numbers of displaced students abandon their studies and run around the province in groups holding anti-Christian conferences everywhere and painting the missionaries as spies of foreign governments. They vent their anger especially against our schools, even threaten the teachers and pupils in order to get them to desert the Mission schools.

“Things came to a head with what happened in Canton on 23 June of this year 1925. At the moment we find ourselves isolated, and the pupils who were and still are most attached to us almost dare not approach us in public.<sup>1</sup>

“Work goes on just the same but it is much harder and there are many obstacles.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The incident on 30 May 1925 in Shanghai and the boycott of Canton**

In his account, Bishop Versiglia mentioned “what happened in Canton.” It is one of the most serious events in the history of Kwan-tung over these years with bitter consequences for Europeans and the Missions.

Halfway through May 1925, during a dispute at a cotton factory managed by Japanese in Shanghai, a Communist union representative was killed. On 30 May, students in Shanghai held a nationalist demonstration in the international district in which some ten thousand people took part, and which the British police put down in a bloody manner.

An inquiry by the diplomatic corps established that there had been 21 deaths; the Chinese Press had much higher numbers. Public opinion rose up against foreign arrogance, calling for the abolition of “unequal treaties”, the removal of Concessions in China, the abolition of privileges for foreigners.<sup>3</sup>

A Communist action committee formed the General Workers Union which immediately attracted two hundred thousand members. A general strike on 1 June proved its effectiveness. But in September foreign Powers reached an agreement with the Chinese Government and calm returned.

It was not the same for Southern China. Halfway through June 1925 more than two hundred thousand workers in Hong-kong began a strike that lasted sixteen months. A hundred thousand strikers were transferred to Canton and subsidised by the workers Federation. There they held

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1 Out of fear of reprisals and persecution by organisations set up to “combat the stranger”, “destroy the Catholic Church”, “combat the religion of Jesus”. These are the words posted on offices of organisations and carried on placards in demonstrations. (Cf. *Inter Nos*, Anno VI no. 2, pp. 5–6; no. 4, pp. 13–14; no. 5, pp. 17–19).

2 Annual Reports, Arch. Sal. 9, 5, Vers.

3 See the beautiful account by a qualified witness: C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, vol. I, Rome 1946, pp. 227–231.

demonstrations against the Europeans. On 23 June 1925 a large demonstration tried to force an entrance into the European Concession. The police reacted. A number of innocent students whom the demonstrators had put in the front ranks were killed.<sup>4</sup>

The workers organised a fierce boycott of all foreign goods, applying severe penalties to transgressors. Most Europeans who found themselves in Canton fled Hong-kong. Those who remained led a difficult life in the European Concession. A few schools run by Europeans had to close down.<sup>5</sup>

The students organised a systematic anti-European propaganda campaign and bands of them went through Kwang-tung preaching hatred against the foreigner, death to Imperialism, and banning European goods. The boycott against goods lasted until 10 October 1926.<sup>6</sup>

Together with this xenophobic movement, in 1924 the bolshevisation of the army began, as well as the Communist propaganda we have spoken of above.

### **The Annual Report for 1926. The spread of Bolshevist-led persecution**

The report for the following year, dated 24 October 1926, was done by the Provicar because Bishop Versiglia was absent. It stresses the gravity of the situation.

“This year,” he writes “Kwang-tung was not a theatre for fratricidal war, but the forge preparing for the larger war of recent times in the Chinese Republic, a real revolution extending through bordering provinces and reaching into the heart of China, Han-kow, and threatening the capital itself. It is not easy to predict what effects will come from this new struggle, organised and led under the banner of the Russian flag.

“Shiu-chow this year has seen thousands of soldiers marching through its streets, The city has been host for consecutive months to armed forces aiming at the North. Yet we can only be content with the behaviour of the troops, extremely well-disciplined and very deferential toward the population who still remember the abuses, harassment, injustices and maltreatment in the past.

“They no longer knew their brothers in red uniforms, led by very competent officers who, in less than a year, have transformed the army, using the most modern means.<sup>7</sup>

“The Mission itself has not had reason to complain; and for this we are most grateful to the local authorities, always concerned, and attentive to the needs of the Mission and the missionaries.

“But another war, a much more murderous one has threatened the religious structure and threatens to intensify further and penetrate areas where peace, simplicity and the fruitful silence of the country folk has reigned up until now.

“It is a truly organised persecution, a systematic war on religion and its ministers aimed especially at schools and at isolating the European. The strike and boycott in Canton were a simple

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4 Cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 103.

5 Among others, the Sacred Heart College run by the Marist Brothers with 600 pupils; the girls Holy Spirit School, run by the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate from Montreal (Cf. *Inter Nos*, Anno VII, no. 5, p. 4.

6 Cf. H. McAleavy, *Storia della Cina moderna*, 2nd edition, Milan 1971, pp. 302–303. *Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 13, pp. 53–54.

7 See above: The Nationalist Government associates itself with Communism in conquering China. The two columns of the expeditionary forces, having left Canton in July 1926 (a third left from Swa-tow), crossed the Shiu-chow region. The first one advanced into Hu-nan and in October reached and occupied Han-kow on the Yang-tze River. The second, led by Chiang Kai Shek, reached Nan-chang the capital of Kiang-si, and spent the winter there. (Cf. H. McAleavy, *Storia della Cina moderna*, pp. 311–312).

opportunity which increased and made the struggle worse which had already begun in Kwang-tung with sectarian elements, blind followers and imitators of the Bolsheviks.

“Canton ports are still closed to ships from Hong-kong and Macao and Europeans can only bring in strictly personal luggage. Sometimes they even question and confiscate entire collections of items.

“Three Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from Italy who arrived in February (1926) in Canton, had, as their first greeting on touching Chinese soil where they had come to work, the unfortunate surprise of having some of their luggage confiscated and only after a fortnight of complaints and appeal to the authorities by an experienced missionary were they able to get their things back.”

### **What afflicts our hearts is the war against religion**

“But the economic war, the hardships, privations, personal sacrifices are not what frighten us. What afflicts our hearts and caused many tears is the war against religion, carried out through conferences, parades, press, hostile demonstrations of all kinds, but also through intimidation and violence and there have been victims. Anti-Christian propaganda has been rife in many districts. Thank the Lord, most of the Christians especially the older ones, have not allowed themselves to be influenced. But the pagans have been affected, catechumens are suffering and are afraid and hesitant to proceed with the conversion that has begun. Their number has visibly decreased.”<sup>8</sup>

“All over China there has been a demonstration against the Christian Christmas and the most vulgar blasphemies were published against our Saviour. At the last moment the Government itself suspended these shameless demonstrations.”<sup>9</sup>

But at Nam-yung the program of violence was also in force. Here is an account by a missionary there, Fr Dal Masso.

### **A sad episode of violence in Nam-yung**

“I am writing from Yongleu, (European house, Mission residence in the city of Nam-yung) on the afternoon of Christmas Day (1925) which began joyfully but finished in sorrow.”

After describing Midnight Mass and the Dawn Mass attended by many Christians with edifying fervour, he goes on:

“We were celebrating the Sung Mass in the morning at 10.30. A good number of the faithful had come. In the city, soldiers and students had begun propaganda against Christmas. There were speakers in the main street. When Mass was over I saw a cohort of soldiers advancing on the church. They all carried a red flag attached to their rifle barrels, and many carried posters saying; “Persecute and bring down the Church”. A crowd of people followed the officers on horseback.

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<sup>8</sup> The news was confirmed two months later on 1 January 1927, *Inter Nos*, Anno VII, no. 1. p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> The parade of nude women we mentioned earlier.

“They put on a violent demonstration. About a hundred individuals crowded into the back of the church and wanted all the Christians to leave and abandon the missionary. One Christian was beaten.

“I got the Christians to go outside and I went to the door to try to persuade these madmen that we were not doing anything that was about Imperialism but only religion ... But my voice was drowned out by a thousand people yelling: "Get out, we'll kill you!" These were the words I heard most clearly.

“I managed to push two demonstrators away who were at the door and I closed it. Then a rally started with six speakers. Then they started throwing stones. All the windows were shattered. Decorations, vases, anything in reach of the stones was broken. Luckily the door held against the stones. Inside, a good group of girls who had come to sing the Mass, and some women, who had not dared to flee earlier, were trembling at the shouts and insults that echoed around for five hours ... The head of the urban police, who had been repeatedly called, eventually came to protect the entrance. He immediately had a violent verbal disagreement with an officer from Hu-nan who was inciting the crowd. By night time the howling mob came to an end. I sent a telegram to the Governor of Canton ... But this sort of thing could happen again.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The prestige of the Don Bosco Institute**

The Provicar's report then goes on to speak of the work done despite the serious difficulties. Amongst other things he says:

“Our Don Bosco Institute has not only grown in numbers but also in the respect and prestige it has earned in the city.

“The Mandarin is so enthusiastic about our work that he often comes to visit us, and speaks about us with admiration to everyone, such that it causes some jealousy which in one public assembly manifested itself in one of the by now usual derogatory references to “foreigners”. But in a polite and kind manner, though resolute, he replied: “Good is international. A wise person sees this and approves of it.”<sup>11</sup>

“An English Protestant doctor asked us: ‘Why are your boys always so nice. And how have you managed to develop your works like this? You have just begun and we were at our peak: today you are filled with youngsters and our buildings are empty. Do you have Confession and Communion here? I admire and marvel at your work.’

“A Chinese Lutheran, teacher of literature and mathematics, said privately and in public: “I believe in an earthly paradise and I see it with my own eyes and feel happy about it: Don Bosco's schools are the home of cheerfulness and peace, they are the hem of paradise.”<sup>12</sup>

“On 10 July 1926 we had the prize-giving ceremony with a great number of people from the public and the authorities in attendance. The opening march played by our band, then came the

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10 At Yongleu, a European house in Nam-yung, as well as the chapel, there was a small well-attended school. “Following the devastation at Christmas 1925, no pupil dared be seen there such was the fear of reprisals against them ... In the city, Communist propaganda, led by a real Russian, railed against everything European” (*Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 7, p. 28).

11 Account of the work in 1925-1926, dated 24 October 1926. Annual Reports, Arch. Sal. 9, 5, Vers. Cf. *Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 5, pp. 17-18; Anno VI, no. 12, p. 47.

12 *Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 12, p. 46.

reverences made to the flag and the founder of the Republic, Sun Yat Sen, whose political testament was read out. They followed the Chinese national anthem. Then the eleven graduates from the technical school came forward in order of merit to receive their certificate from the Mandarin.<sup>13</sup>

“Only one sad note, the absence of Bishop Versiglia” the report concludes. “The boys are so fond of him and were chanting his name in a loud voice.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 12, p. 48. The boarders numbered 240: 180 accommodated at Don Bosco and around sixty of the primary students at St Joseph's College in Ho-sai, which was available after the departure of the novices (August 1925). Later pupil numbers would reach 385, day students included (*Summ.* p. 167).

<sup>14</sup> Bishop Versiglia left for North America on 2 May, as we will say in the following chapter.

## THE EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS IN CHICAGO

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1926–1927

### **Intense apostolic activity**

A letter from the Major Superiors in Turin which arrived in Shiu-chow on 23 April 1926, invited the bishop to take part in the Eucharistic Congress in Chicago, to be held from 20 to 26 June. He gladly accepted the invitation out of deep respect for the Superiors and to seize upon an opportunity to collect donations for the Mission which was in need of aid.<sup>1</sup>

He left Shiu-chow on 2 May 1926. Since the railways were only partially functioning he had to cover large sections on foot or by boat, with serious hardships. He reached Canton on 4 May and Hong-kong on the 5<sup>th</sup>. On 8 May he sailed for Shanghai where he met spent time with the Salesian confreres from 11 to 13 May. He reached San Francisco on 2 June.<sup>2</sup>

The period following the Congress was packed with apostolic activities: preaching retreats, ordinations, propaganda conferences.

Especially remembered is the retreat he preached to the novices, aspirants and confreres in New Rochelle from 11–17 July 1926. Given such a preacher, the Provincial, Fr Emanuele Manassero, was able to leave immediately New York where he had urgent matters to attend to. He wrote to the bishop from there asking him to do the private talk with the confreres and the homily at the closing of the retreat. The confreres were edified both by the preaching and their private chat with the bishop.

He also gave the closing conference for all the other retreat sessions.<sup>3</sup>

### **Operated on in hospital in Montreal**

On 20 September he went to Canada to drum up support and to visit the flourishing Chinese colony in Montreal. On the evening 25 September, while staying at the episcopal residence in

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<sup>1</sup> *Inter Nos*, Supplement no. 1, 30 April 1926.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Inter Nos*, Anno VI, no. 10, p. 40; Supplement no. 2, June 1926. For the trip to Shanghai cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 119, which has reference to the House Chronicle in Shanghai.

<sup>3</sup> On Bishop Versiglia's stay in the United States and Canada there is a valuable extract from the diary which Fr Manassero included in his Memoirs pp. 17–24.

Montreal, he felt sudden violent pains. He was quickly taken to hospital and on 14 October was operated on for appendicitis.<sup>4</sup>

He gave news of this himself in a letter to his confreres at Shiu-chow from the Hopital de Notre Dame in Montreal, on 2 November 1926.

“This is the second day I have got out of bed,” he writes “after an operation on the appendix which I had two weeks ago. Having arrived in Montreal, I did some propaganda work, some other work and was getting ready to leave for per New York when on the night before my departure I felt some strong pain. Good Father Caillé, who was busy with the Chinese colony and had wanted me to stay with him urgently called one of the best doctors. Having found out about the case, the doctor himself brought me in his vehicle to the hospital. I have no words to express the charity, concern, show of respect with which I was welcomed there. I was immediately set up in a small ward with all the comfort imaginable. The cost per day was very high. A gentleman who was in the nearby ward, as soon as he heard of my arrival, let the hospital administration know that he would be covering all the costs of my stay in hospital.

“But the administration, thanking him, replied that it was an honour they did not intend to give away. I was the first bishop to attend this hospital.

“My condition was such as to make the operation very risky. Sufficient to say that when they took blood to do an analysis it coagulated in their syringe. So they preferred to give me the required medicines and in ten days I was able to face up to the operation without too much risk.

“The consequences are certainly taking their time given my weak condition. Nevertheless, thanks the Lord, all is going well and I hope to leave hospital within a week, return to new York and think of my return back home. I am well now after an operation that, given my conditions, looked quite serious. We can see that our little urchins in Shiu-chow have been praying for me! All has gone well. May the Lord bless you all confreres and pupils.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Forced convalescence. Available to the confreres**

On 18 December the bishop was able to return to New Rochelle where he was welcomed with great warmth by the confreres who celebrated his return. But the Salesian confrere who had accompanied the bishop had brought with him two letters from the doctors who had been looking after him at the hospital: one was for the Provincial, Fr Manassero and the other for the Apostolic Delegate in Washington, Archbishop Fumasoni. The doctors said that the bishop needed six months rest.

On 21 December the bishop and Fr Manassero were in Washington, where the Apostolic Delegate succeeded in convincing Bishop Versiglia to stay for a rest for at least three months.<sup>6</sup>

He himself wrote about this to his confreres in Shiu-chow, on 30 December 1926.

“After I left hospital I thought I would be free. Instead the doctors followed me up with letters to the Provincial, Manassero, and the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Fumasoni.

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4 Cf. Extract from Fr Manassero's diary, pp. 18-19; Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

5 *Inter Nos*, Supplement no. 4, 20-12-1926.

6 The event is described precisely and in minute detail in the Extract from Fr Emanuele Manassero's diary, p. 19, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.



“The reason given by the doctors is that two months after the operation the wound has still not healed and that the prospect of the sea voyage means I should remain here for at least six months. I have been persuaded to promise that I will not leave until the end of March, unless something special crops up requiring a change to those arrangements.

“I regret immensely having to leave my Provicar burdened by the Mission, even more so because his own health is more precarious than mine. Therefore, if he believes I should come immediately, in all tranquillity and with no concern, let him telegraph me and I will leave immediately. For the time I am here I will try not to be useless for the Mission.

“To all the confreres, Sisters, boys and girls, my fondest greetings for a happy new year. I bless you all with all my heart in Jesus’ name.”<sup>7</sup>

In a telegram sent a few days later, he made specified how he would keep the promise to be useful: “I have recovered. This is a good time to gather donations. Telegraph me if the confreres prefer immediate return.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Blessed be the Lord, including in our humiliation**

The news that came to him from Shiu-chow had revealed the difficulties in the Mission: the anti-religious campaign which had unfortunately also had some victories in the Don Bosco Institute<sup>9</sup> and the financial situation of the Mission.

“The news sent me” he replies “was not unforeseen and so its impact was less seriously felt. But it is certainly so sad to see the gradual dismantling of the work that has cost us so much pain and sacrifice. And seeing it ruined by the very people for whom we are working ...

“We too have to share in the lot of our Divine Master: “He came to what was his own and his people did not accept him” (Jn 1:11). Yes, this is our vineyard, these are our children. It is for them we work, not for ourselves. But they do not recognise it; they do not want to accept our work and want to go to perdition, mocking us because we want to do them good. Well, blessed by the Name of the Lord, including in our humiliations ... These trials will do us good ... I recommend you to Mary Help of Christians that she may guide you, sustain you and console you. I pray daily that your courage may not fail ... I thank all of you, confreres and Sisters, for so much that you have done and have suffered during the year ... Remember that we have placed our financial difficulties under the protection of St Joseph and difficulties of the missionary work under the protection of Mary Help of Christians. I bless you with all my heart and wish you a happy Easter.”<sup>10</sup>

### **He was a source of edification, comfort and help for me**

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<sup>7</sup> *Inter Nos*, Supplement no. 6, 20 February 1927.

<sup>8</sup> *Inter Nos*, Supplement no. 6, 20 February 1927. “Our beloved Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Versiglia,” writes the Provicar, Fr Guarona “had to go to America to look for the daily bread for his missionaries and for funds to maintain some vocations” (*Inter Nos*, Anno VII, no. 6, p. 4, 1 May 1927). Also writing to his mother from New Rochelle on 20 December 1926, the bishop explains the double purpose for prolonging his stay in the United States: “My dearest mother, I have not yet left America, but have delayed a little longer not just to work on behalf of the Mission but especially to recover well. This time spent far from the concerns of the Mission has given me renewed strength and I feel rejuvenated.” (Letter kept in the museum attached to Don Bosco’s rooms at the Salesian Oratory at Valdocco).

<sup>9</sup> Eight day students at Don Bosco whose conduct was most reprehensible, along with some others “rejected by schools in the city” had gone to a school for Communist propaganda and had come to “infest Don Bosco Institute with ranting and raving, blasphemies, leaflets and even threats against pupils guilty of attending foreign priests’ schools, studying religion and getting drunk on the fanaticism of these Europeans, true front-line ‘dogs’ of imperialist governments” (*Inter Nos*, Anno VII, no. 3, p. 2).

<sup>10</sup> The letter is reported minus a date in *Inter Nos*, Supplement no. 8, 2 April 1927. It was probably in February 1927.

Though with greater care, he once more took up his apostolic ministry and conferences, arousing keen sympathy and collecting many donations. Fr Manassero, who was beside him during a Pontifical held in New York on 23 January 1927, writes: "I was truly edified by his serious piety and recollection throughout the ceremony, despite lack of service and plenty of distractions around.

"During the time he was in the United States, Bishop Versiglia was a source of great comfort and help for me. Great comfort because I was able to share some of the disappointments I had and that he had also experienced and was able to advise me on. He told me that during his last trip to Italy to take part in the General Chapter, he had said a final goodbye to his mother and was not counting on returning again. He was of help because he preached a number of retreats to the confreres, receiving their *rendiconti* (their 'manifestation' or personal chat), and then gave a number of conference to them when it was impossible for me due to my poor health and other pressing matters."<sup>11</sup>

### **A man who by now touched the world only with his feet**

Faithful to what he had promised and keen to return to his flock, on 28 March he was in San Francisco, ready to sail for China. But there was another hitch: the confreres in San Francisco, and especially the Provincial, Fr Trinchieri, wanted him to spend Easter with them. Fr Trinchieri telegraphed his colleague, the Provincial in Macao, on 30 March. The bishop was forced to give in.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding these days spent at the Parish of Sts Peter and Paul in San Francisco, we have a valuable account from a confrere who was there, Fr Eusebio Battezzati. We will record a good part of it.

"He spent some days with us awaiting his return to China.

"He spoke to us after evening prayers during the little talk that the Salesians call the Good Night. I would be unable to repeat anything in particular. I do recall that his words sounded inspired, coming from the mouth of a man whose thoughts and heart, if not out of this world, were certainly above the world which he by now touched only with his feet. He had gone beyond it, still wanting to give so much to it but expecting nothing from it."

### **An instrument of penance**

"Our confrere, Coadjutor John Pellegrino had been asked to keep the bishop's room in order. He confided in me that one day, making the bed, he found an item that was clearly an instrument of penance. Just then the bishop came back to his room.

'What is this?' the confrere asked, pointing to the item.

'Just leave it there' came the answer in a joking tone but he was clearly put out by having forgotten to remove it. 'These are things you shouldn't know about.'

He hurriedly picked the item up and changed the topic."

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<sup>11</sup> *Memorie di don Emanuele Manassero*, p. 22; Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Inter Nos*, News sheet, Appendix to Supplement no. 8, 2 April 1927. In 1926 the China Vice-province became a Province including the Mission in Japan. The Provincial was still Fr Ignazio Canazei.

## **We are talking about a saint, a man who no longer is of this earth**

“On Easter Sunday, 17 April 1927, the bishop was present for the solemn Mass in our parish and gave the homily. He spoke from the sanctuary. His words, spoken with particular unction, immediately impressed the faithful. This was unusual! Even in the choir loft and choir members and even the organist were likewise impressed and listened to every word. They spoke to me about it after the ceremony: ‘These are words coming from a saint.’

“He had truly left the impression of a man who had overcome the world.

“One day I was asked to take the bishop on a visit to the surrounding area. A friend of ours had offered to take us in his vehicle. We went along some of the beautiful areas along the Pacific coast; I tried to interest the bishop pointing to things worthy of note. After I had spoken a lot, very kindly he whispered: ‘Why do you want to get me interested in these things? By now the world has not more interest for me. I feel I have not long to live and this will be my last trip.’

“While he was speaking I had the impression that he was saying something very serious, something that hung over him and was not far away.

“I asked him why he did not go back through Italy on his return to China.

‘There is an ill wind blowing in China these days’ I told him.

‘And that is really why I would like to be back there where the Lord has placed me,’ he replied ‘and where his voice calls me. My flock is calling me and I need to be back among them as soon as possible.’

“When I was in Los Angeles and learned from the newspapers of his heroic end, what came to mind were those days spent with him in San Francisco and I concluded to myself: ‘The bishop was offering this supreme sacrifice God found him to be ready. Martyrdom is not a sudden act, but a constant tension toward God and an uninterrupted series of actions that prepare for it.’<sup>13</sup>

The impressions of the Salesian confreres in San Francisco and of the public who heard the bishop on 17 April 1927, Easter Sunday at the parish of Sts Peter and Paul, all turned on one thing. What they inferred from his words was what was in the holy bishop’s soul.

## **A letter to the Carmel in Florence. I feel a great desire to become a saint**

It was precisely during those days, on 8 April, that the bishop opened his soul in a letter to his beloved Sisters at the Carmel in Florence. We reproduce it here in its entirety, because it faithfully mirrors the soul of the saintly bishop and pictures the situation in the Shiu-chow Mission at the time.

“Reverend Mother and dearest Sisters in the Lord, I feel I am to blame for not having written for a year or even longer. And I do not even want to try to beg pardon for this, even more so because throughout this time I have experienced the help of your prayers more than ever before. I have experienced them personally and our dear Mission in Shiu-chow has experienced them.

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<sup>13</sup> *Memorie di Don Eusebio Battezzati*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

“For my part, despite my weaknesses, my wretchedness, I feel this year more than ever before a real desire to become a saint. My daily lack of correspondence to this is incalculable; yet the Lord has pursued me with his grace so that I do not avoid his loving invitation.

“For sure I cannot in any way explain these salutary effects unless they come through the very special help of my angels from the Carmel. What can I do to repay you?

“The only thing I can assure you of is that not a day has gone by without my offering to the Lord for you everything I could gain for myself in the Holy Mass. A day has not gone by when I have not said to our adorable Jesus that, since I am unable to make myself a saint, he might sanctify you more, as his beloved brides; and that since I cannot mortify myself or make sacrifices, he might accept you as generous victims spontaneously offering yourselves to his love; and that since I cannot give him consolation in any way, he may make your hearts a garden, adorn it with his most beautiful flowers, and can browse there and be consoled there as takes his fancy; and since I am distracted by a thousand thoughts, He may draw your heart close to His, so that you may only live from Him and only breathe as He breathes.

“Oh, if only my prayer could be just a little bit effective, I would like you all to be other Teresas of Jesus (Avila), to all be consumed by Jesus’ love. Thus he would at least have the consolation, honour and glory from you that I cannot give him ... But unfortunately, I fear that due to my coldness and lack of correspondence my prayers are perfectly useless. But that doesn’t matter; I want you to continue just the same and I hope that the Lord, if he does not want to listen to my request, will at least listen because of the fervour of your charity.

“The Lord has given me a special grace this year. And though it is part of the temporal order, nevertheless it is linked with particular spiritual graces. I am talking about the illness that came upon me and kept me in hospital for almost three months. It brought me to the gates of eternity; but the Lord brought me back from there, gave me back my life and restored my strength.”

### **I want to spend my entire life for the Lord**

“Oh, I don’t think I am attached to this life,” the bishops continues “but I appreciate the fact that the Lord has given life back to me, along with a keen desire to spend it all for Him. Just the same, I feel so weak that I fear that this too has to be one of the many graces have not corresponded to. I beg you, my Mother and Sisters, I beg you: ask the Lord that his calls will not be in vain because of the hardness of my heart.

“Also our dear Mission at Shiu-chow has experienced the assistance of your prayers. Yes, it is a real miracle from the Lord and our Blessed Lady that despite the incalculable difficulties, our dear missionaries are still able to continue their work. We could say that our Mission is at the centre of the Revolution. Anti-Christian rallies are carried out there; propaganda against foreign religions, especially the Christian religion, are intensifying there. The laws against Catholic schools are being

discussed there and tried out.<sup>14</sup> The revolutionary armies are concentrated there, and from there go in various directions toward the North.<sup>15</sup>

“If our missionaries and Sisters are still at their post despite all these difficulties, and our colleges are not only still open but overflowing with students, and if the schools in the various districts are fully functioning; if, despite serious concerns for the future, there is just the same strong hope that we can continue to work for the Lord’s cause, you say, is this not almost a miracle?

“To whom do we attribute the merit for being so privileged thus far? Certainly not to our merits, but to the hidden assistance we receive; to the assistance that comes from the solitude of the Carmel, where victims offer themselves daily for their brothers exposed to the difficulties of the present moment.

“So thank you, thanks for your charity. But continue to pressure the Heart of Jesus because without special graces I fear, I strongly fear ...

“I will be leaving as soon as I can so I can be back among my confreres and my children. Pray to the Lord not so he can spare me the sacrifices but so he can spare the works which have meant so much hardship, so much sweat and so many sacrifices from my good confreres and zealous Sisters. May the Lord reward you for the charity you show our dear Mission, doubling his grace in you and binding you more tightly to his Heart.

“With the greatest affection I am able to show you in the Lord, I bless all of you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Your brother in the Lord, Luigi Versiglia.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Detachment from the world and a thirst for God**

When Bishop Versiglia wrote to the Carmelites in Florence he certainly did not have with him the Letter St Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Romans, and especially the second verse in Chapter Seven: “My earthly desires are crucified; there is no longer the fire of material desire in me. Living water (that is, the Holy Spirit) is what murmurs inside me and tells me: Come to the Father.” His soul had the same attitude: complete detachment from the world and a thirst to reach God.

We read in Fr Manassero’s memoirs: “We left San Francisco almost the same day, myself on 31 March for Australia and he on the 1st April for China.<sup>17</sup> In Australia I received a most edifying letter which unfortunately I have lost. It was dated 26 April 1927. I have written down some lines from it in a notebook which I have kept: “Help me with your prayers to become a saint. I very much want this. especially after my illness, the Lord has increased this desire. So blessed be his crosses too when the Lord sends them. Write to me and suggest something that will be good for my soul.”<sup>18</sup>

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14 Here are the government orders for Shiu-chow for the 1926-1927 school year: 1. All schools, including private ones, must have a Chinese principal. 2. The term ‘private’ must appear in the name of the school and the notehead. 3. All staff need to have certification. 4. Texts have to be those approved by the Ministry of Education. 5. Religion teaching is to be excluded. 6. Foreigners must only be ‘councillors’ in the school. (Circular from the Provicar, Fr Giovanni Guarona, Shiu-chow 20 January 1927: see collection of *Inter Nos*, January 1927).

15 See Chapter 13, section entitled ‘Nationalists and Communists...’

16 *Lettere al Carmelo di Firenze*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

17 As we have seen above, the bishop was delayed by the confreres in San Francisco until after Easter, which in 1927 was 17 April.

18 *Memorie di Don Emanuele Manassero*, p. 22, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

As he had done when going to America, so also on his return, the bishop stopped over in Shanghai to see the few confreres who were staying in a temporarily rented place after the revolution and war had forced them out of their large Pa Hong Institute.

The handful of lines in the House Chronicle in Shanghai are surprising: “19 May 1927. Bishop Aloysius Versiglia arrives from the United States and kept us happy for two days. He leaves for Hong-kong on the 21<sup>st</sup>.”<sup>19</sup>

Very strict with himself, Bishop Versiglia was happy and joking with others, A sower of joy which echoed the inner joy of a soul in constant union with God.

In his clairvoyant charity he had understood that a little bit of cheerfulness was what those confreres needed, cast from their home by the revolution and tossed into dark uncertainty regarding their future and their work.

“He left us a substantial donation, despite his own Mission being in serious financial difficulties” Fr Garelli, the then Rector in Shanghai added in a chat he had with the writer on 28 March 1974.

The poor are more capable of understanding the afflictions of the poor; and the man of God is led to imitate a characteristic feature of God’s, which is to give.

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<sup>19</sup> The item is reported in: M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 122.

## VISIT FROM THE RECTOR MAJOR'S REPRESENTATIVE

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The Missionary House

1927

### **The Visitor will be here in a few days time. I am very happy about it**

On the evening of 23 May 1927, the vigil of the Feast of Mary Help of Christians, when Bishop Versiglia arrived in Macao, he found the welcoming reception at the port to include his sons from the Salesian Institute and with them also the Prefect General of the Congregation, Fr Peter Ricaldone, who had arrived a week earlier as the Visitor to the Salesian Missions in the East. The welcome was a very warm one and on the following day, the Feast of the Help of Christians at which two Superiors presided, was among the most solemn of them. Added to that was the visit from three bishops who had come to greet Bishop Versiglia, and the representative of the Rector Major of the Salesians. The Bishops were Bishop Da Costa Nunes of macao, Bishop Fourquet of Canton, and Bishop Walsh of Kong-moon. They all took part in the festivities.<sup>1</sup>

Some days later Bishop Versiglia reached Shiu-chow after an absence of thirteen months. It was cause for great joy for him to see his dear sons, and for them to have such a good father and such a valuable help in moments of difficulty for the Mission by their side once more. He soon gave news of it to the Rector Major, Fr Rinaldi in a letter on 6 June 1927:

“I have been among our dear Chinese now once again for a few days. The voyage, thank the Lord, was a good one and I found the Mission tranquil, at least for the moment. But we should not delude ourselves too much. It is clear that the Nationalist Government is looking to take upon itself all the schools. This would be a very serious blow to us. We hope in the help of the Lord. Help us and get others to help us with prayers...

“The Visitor has arrived in Macao, and will be here in a few days. I am very happy about it, because he can see by being here that his sons at the Mission in Shiu-chow have not lost either the spirit of Don Bosco, or their attachment to the Superiors; but while adapting themselves to the needs of the Mission, their religious spirit has remained unchanged. I believe we can say that they have done and are doing honour to the Congregation. I pray to the Lord that they keep this spirit of theirs and that you will send many other confreres who will follow in their footsteps.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> House Chronicle, Macao, pp. 258–260.

<sup>2</sup> *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal., 9, 3, Vers.

The Visitor, Fr Peter Ricaldone had arrived in Macao on 16 May. He then went to Shanghai and Japan (27 May–16 July). From 19 to 26 July he preached the retreat to the confreres in Macao and only in August was able to reach the Vicariate in Shiu-chow.<sup>3</sup> The Provincial, Fr Canazei, had communicated that the Visitor “wanted to see all the stations where missionaries were residing.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The situation in Shiu-chow on the bishop’s return**

Regarding the situation he found on his return to the Vicariate, the bishop gives a report in the Mission Journal *Inter Nos*.

“The horizon is becoming clearer,” he writes “the situation is slowly improving. We were able to close the school year in July, and gain approval for certificates for twenty students from the technical and professional course. All the schools have re-opened for the new year with a greater number of pupils and growing signs of trust and sympathy.

“Missionary work is still being carried out amid many difficulties and hardships, due to the forced reduction in personnel working directly in the districts. We are still too few: only eight missionaries for the vast Mission in its entirety. There are another eight priests at the Centre who for health reasons or because they are involved in school or social work can only give the districts brief and temporary assistance. The distances between residences are such and the communication routes so impervious as to wear down the strongest elements and make us lose the energies needed for evangelisation through the hardships of travelling.

“The destructive work of Bolshevist propaganda spread throughout the whole region entrusted to us has shaken the faith and made the faith of many new Christians waver. They absolutely need the missionary always at their side to rebut the errors spread with poisonous malice and ingenious perversity, and to support, animate, protect and comfort the souls won over to Jesus with unspeakable sacrifices. Every week the missionary is absent inexorably marks a cooling down in the Christian community, and a turning back to the past if not even a pitiful return to paganism.

“This missionary presence which was sought out, competed for and envied some years ago, especially during warlike disturbances or while troops were passing through, can today be a real burden or even cause annoyance, nuisance and harassment for the Christians who put us up.

“There are still extremist elements among Nationalist troops, convinced Bolsheviks and fanatics who, when they are discovered and are condemned to a firing squad go to their death shouting: “Long live anarchy! Long live Bolshevism!”<sup>5</sup> When these turbulent spirits reach the villages, suburbs or city, their first heroic undertaking is to occupy the missionary residences, scare off the guards by pointing their revolvers at them and firing their rifles. When the missionary is there they are not so daring; but there are insults, threats, harassment aimed at wearing down the poor priest’s patience. His nerves are in constant tension due to the insults he hears and the abuses and cowardly acts he has to put up with. It is a constant martyrdom and even more cruel inasmuch as today these victims of sectarian hatred and materialism have learned how to blaspheme. China never knew filth of this kind: the wave of Bolshevism has brought it in.

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<sup>3</sup> For dates, cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico...* p. 197.

<sup>4</sup> *Inter Nos*, Supplement no. 13, 4 July 1927.

<sup>5</sup> See above “Split between nationalists and communists”. Chiang Kai Shek’s efforts to free himself from Communism were in vain and after twenty years of success and failure, he gave up and retired to Formosa (Taiwan).



“Commanders of brigades, Generals in charge of divisions give orders and publish edicts and proclamations, but often without effect. They join with the soldiers against us, openly or secretly, pupils of Communist propaganda schools. After the new Nationalist direction which is adverse to Communism, they have taken refuge with relatives or acquaintances in the more remote villages and continue their destructive work no longer through rallies, but in the families. And often, if the missionary’s authoritative word is absent, they are blinded and persuaded by the gossip of those who have been able to study.

“Let us not delude ourselves: China is by now without faith! Now the cult of the ancestors and idols has been shaken and has collapsed, they are going headlong into materialism and atheism, in a fearful collapse.”<sup>6</sup>

This serious claim with which the bishop concludes his report was unfortunately a prophecy of what would happen in the twenty years that followed his glorious death.

### **A day of happy, warm company. The visit to the districts**

The Visitor, Fr Peter Ricaldone arrived in Shiu-chow on 9 August 1927, accompanied by the Provincial, Fr Canazei.

“The bishop welcomed him with great humility as his Superior” one of those present tells us. “He absolutely wanted him to take the main place at table and say grace, restricting himself to blessing the meal.”<sup>7</sup>

After a day of happy, warm company with Bishop Versiglia,<sup>8</sup> on 11 August Fr Ricaldone left for his visit to the districts: first to Chi-hing and Nam-yung, then to Yan-fa and Lok-chong, sometimes on horseback, at other times by boat, on foot, and often for sections that covered fifty kilometres a day or more, in sunshine or rain. Fr Ricaldone showed the resistance of a well-trained missionary.

At Li-hau-kiau, near Nam-yung, he administered seven adult baptisms. He would have liked to speak about his joy to the newly baptised, but had to limit himself to a warm and affectionate smile. Chinese is the sort of language where one cannot even learn a few phrases in just a few days.

At Chi-hing, during a stopover with a Christian family, a small child stood looking ecstatically, contemplating “the big man with the white beard”; he put many questions to him as he used to do with the local missionary. Then he went back to his father, disheartened and scandalised:

“He’s so old” he said “and has a white beard, but he doesn’t know how to talk yet!”

After ten days or so he returned to Shiu-chow and from there left for the districts in the West, Yeung-shan and Lin-chow, five days and four nights by boat, crouched up or lying down on two planks, bothered by the heat, the mosquitoes, the smoke from the small stove at the stern, and the uninterrupted cries from the boatmen. On the fifth day Fr Ricaldone was at the end of his patience and preferred to go on foot to Yeung-shan.

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<sup>6</sup> *Inter Nos*, Anno VIII, no. 1, pp. 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> *Summ.* p. 303.

<sup>8</sup> On the warm relationships between Bishop Versiglia and Fr Ricaldone, see the testimony of Fr Bartolomeo Fochesato, *Summ.* p. 139.

Having visited the Christians there, he went on by horseback to Lin-chow, the capital of the region, with a flourishing Christian community. Here there was a great welcome and visits to other surrounding areas.<sup>9</sup>

### **Homage from the communities in Shiu-chow for the representative of the Rector Major**

When the Rector Major's representative returned to Shiu-chow, a month had gone by since his arrival. The pupils had returned for classes at the two colleges, one for boys the other for girls. The missionaries in the districts had come down for the retreat. It was preached by Fr Ricaldone himself, from 13-20 September; he then presided for some days at meetings the missionaries usually had following the retreat.

On the evening of 24 September, the girls at Mary Help of Christians School fêted the Visitor with a successful Academy. On the Sunday, 25 September, the boys at Don Bosco all took part in a Eucharistic liturgy celebrated by Fr Ricaldone, and then they celebrated him at dinner, followed by an Academy at which all the teachers in the boarding and day section were present.

On 26 September, Fr Ricaldone took leave of the Salesian confreres who gathered around him. He highlighted the marvellous development that the Salesian Work in Shiu-chow had achieved in nine years of existence, told them all how pleased he was and how grateful the Congregation was. Bishop Versiglia recalled the first group of missionaries, the first twelve who went out two by two after consecrating themselves and their Mission to the Help of Christians in the poor chapel in the old residence. It was the Pinar di Stabia chapel of China. Here too the Help of Christians had worked miracles, according to Don Bosco's promise.<sup>10</sup>

### **Bishop's house "the missionary home"**

The first surprise the bishop found when he returned from America was the Bishop's House.

"Bishop Versiglia never wanted to hear any talk about a bishop's house," writes one of his missionaries who at the time had spent seven years working with him "and expressly wanted to provide for all the works in the Vicariate, overlooking himself ... With Chinese casualness, he spent more than a few years in the small, poor residence at the New East Gate. He was then a guest at the Don Bosco Institute. But development at the school had by now taken up all of the house. The bishop was used to the noise from the boys and the shaking of the ceiling every time they changed classrooms; but whenever a sick missionary came to the headquarters, there was not quiet place for the bishop to receive him, not even a room to put up a missionary passing through.

"This situation had led the bishop more than once to talk about a new building. But other works always seemed more urgent, given the scarce financial possibilities.

"We took advantage of his thirteen month absence to build the bishop's house. The bishop did not want to hear this word, but he gave in when they told him that the building was built as a retreat house and a rest home for missionaries, and he wanted it to be called the "Missionary Home".

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<sup>9</sup> For dates of individual visits and some details see M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico...* pp. 197–198, which make use of the personal diary of the Provincial, Fr Canazei. For the account, cf. *Boll. Sal.* February 1928, pp. 49–51.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Boll. Sal.* February 1928, pp. 49–51; M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico ...*, p. 198.

### **As an expert and a good pastor, he know how to take advantage of the occasion**

The aspirants to the priesthood up till now had lived as boarding students at the Don Bosco Institute, alongside other Christian boys and some pagan ones too. This shared living arrangement had some negative aspects to it. For some time the bishop had wanted a house and school just for them. But only two years later, just before his death, could he realise his dream, a seminary. Meanwhile he satisfied himself that his aspirants, while still attending classes at Don Bosco, could live apart from it.

At the end of September 1927, when the confreres retreat was over (it was preached by the Visitor, Fr Ricaldone, in the new building) the bishop brought his beloved aspirants to his place and became their assistant, director and father, much to his great joy. Even greater was the joy felt by the boys at having such a father by their side, even if it was a temporary solution.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> G. Cucchiara, *Tre anni di bolscevismo in Cina*, Florence 1931, pp. 64-65; cf. testimony of Fr Carlo Braga in Summ. p. 155.

## THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROTECTS HIS SHEEP

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In August and again in October 1927, the bishop had to handle two bitter disputes with Communist officials, first of all to save the rooms at the Don Bosco Institute and then the Missionary House. He gives a report on this himself.

### **The wonders of the typewriter**

“Toward the end of August 1927,” he writes “I found myself almost alone at the Don Bosco Institute. All the pupils had left for the holidays and the rooms were empty.<sup>1</sup>

“Some elegantly attired minor officers turned up, asking to visit the Institute. They were pleased with it. And of course they told me they were taking over one floor.

“I replied resolutely that the rooms belonged to the Mission and that the pupils would be filling them once again after the holidays.

“They went away laughing. An hour later an entire troop appeared: officers, soldiers, luggage bearers ... and of course they climbed the stairs, pushed me aside as I tried to hold them back, broke down the door to the students’ study hall and began to carry out the desks to organise the place for themselves.

“I continued to protest this violation of our home and took note of everything they did ... Every now and again so as not to be in pursuit of them all the time, I returned to my room and typed up something that I had to hand.

“This was the gesture that frightened them. They thought I was writing up a report to the authorities and was coming down each time to gather the details. They sent for their Commander to warn him. Fearing a problem, he gave them orders to vacate the premises immediately. When the first officer read the order he was upset, folded it over and put it into his pocket. Then, pretending indifference, he shouted: ‘Let’s go and eat, let’s go and eat.’

“It was still five hours before meal time. But he needed to ‘save face’ which is so important for the Chinese.

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<sup>1</sup> The bishop went to live in the missionary house (bishop’s residence) only at the end of September 1927, after the confreres’ retreat and departure of the Visitor, Fr Ricaldone. We spoke of this in the previous chapter.

“The day before the local newspaper had published that the troop would be billeted at the Catholic Mission!

“They then left a sentry at the door to the study hall.

“Half an hour later an officer returned, all polite, entered my room, sat down, and with a completely Chinese compliment told me: ‘Your house is very nice but we have found another place, so we are giving it back to you. But you must destroy the report you have done when we we carrying down the desks.’

“Smiling I handed him the sheet of paper which was still in the typewriter and had absolutely nothing to do with the fact.

“The officer saluted, gave an order to the sentry and both of them left.

“Oh the wonders of the typewriter!”<sup>2</sup>

The bishop finishes with a joking remark which he used as the heading for his article in *Inter Nos*, but things were not as easy as all that. Fr Braga claims that to stop the soldiers climbing the stairs, he turned his back to them, trying to hold them back. When he saw that it was impossible to resist their strength he regained his calm and began typing.<sup>3</sup>

### **We are better off in mansions**

Things did not go easily a month later when the bishop was already in the new house, the Bishop’s House.<sup>4</sup>

“I was in my office on the first floor,” he writes “just attending to ordinary business. The door was wide open because I wanted to keep an eye on some workers doing something in the house.

“All of a sudden I heard some unusual goings on; I looked up and saw a group of artillery officers from the fourth army brigade<sup>5</sup> who were approaching the door of my office without any regard. They looked in curiously then moved on.

“I immediately understood: they wanted to take over the house; this was all the fashion by now. This is what they did in Kiang-si, Hu-nan, Nam-yung and Chi-hing. Poor Bishop Dumond and Bishop Ciceri had to spend more than three months in their bishops residence with the military and some disgraceful women who follow these kinds of people around.

“I immediately got up, went to meet them and greeted them. But they replied coldly and led me to understand that I could stay where I was because they had no need to be accompanied.

‘Respectful people ask permission before coming into someone else’s house and entering people’s private apartments: your way of doing things does not do you honour’ I told them resolutely. ‘If you need something I am here to satisfy your request.’

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<sup>2</sup> *Inter Nos*, Anno VIII, no. 1, 15 November 1927, pp. 3–4.

<sup>3</sup> *Summ.* p. 172

<sup>4</sup> Testimony of Fr Braga in *Summ.* p. 154 specifies: “In October 1927.”

<sup>5</sup> This army was commanded by Chang Fat Kwai, proud opponent of Chiang Kai Shek, after the latter separated from the Communists. He was the one praised by Bishop Versiglia’s murderers. Cf. Fr Pietro Battezzati, then in Shiu-chow, in *Luigi Versiglia, vescovo e martire*, the single item published by the Diocese of Tortona for the centenary of Bishop Versiglia’s birth, Tortona 1973, p. 36. For Chang Fat Kwai see Chapter 13, ‘Break between nationalists and Communists’, Chapter 23 ‘Disturbed situation in the Lin-chow Region ...’ and footnote 58 also in Chapter 23.

‘We need no permission’ they replied proudly. ‘We are here to see what belongs to us. We need rooms and there are lots of them here. So we have come to take them over. This is Chinese land like all the rest of the land. There are no exemptions any longer: now is the time for equality.’

‘Well then,’ I replied ‘the mandarin’s house is Chinese. Why don’t you go and take that over?’

‘It is already occupied.’

‘This is ours and it too is already occupied. Moreover, it is private property, bought and paid for with our money. So you have no right. Go back to your barracks. Many are completely empty.’

‘Oh no. We are no longer used to staying at the barracks. From the beginning of the war until now we have always stayed in mansions. We are better off in mansions!’

‘These are not reasons, but arrogance’ I replied indignantly.

‘There is no middle ground: we need rooms and you have to give them to us.’

“And after saying this they left.

“I thought they were only words. Instead that afternoon they reappeared with about thirty followers, soldiers, girls in military uniform and other disreputable girls; then came a crowd of luggage bearers.

“They found all the rooms locked. They came to ask for keys and were insolent and insulting.

‘Civil individuals are open to reason, they don’t hurl insults’ I said firmly. ‘I do not insult you, but you add insult to injury after violating our home. This does you no honour. I will bear this in mind and make a report against you.’

“Meanwhile I took out a notebook and pretended to write in it. I saw that my friends were a bit disconcerted by this. Some were ready to leave and carried their luggage downstairs. Others resisted and argued among themselves.

“They had already written directions in chalk at central points in the city, saying that their general headquarters were at the house of the Catholic Mission. And they had come as part of a grand parade through the main streets.

“They argued among themselves for a while and then came back to get the keys. When they didn’t get them they camped on the verandah.

“Later, after I opened the refectory to take Lord knows what, a mouthful of cheese, they invaded that too. It was night time: they had not found another place in time ... And I did not want to exacerbate the situation any more. I resigned myself to spending a sleepless night locked in my room, while the disreputable women and their companions made a heck of a racket outside my door and under the windows. But by morning, having failed to frighten me off, they left.”

“The bishop spent almost the entire night in prayer” Fr Braga tells us.<sup>6</sup>

“We spent some fourteen hours in constant struggle,” the bishop continues “either responding to insults or keeping our nerves steady and not letting ourselves be discouraged. We were exhausted;

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<sup>6</sup> *Summ.* p. 154.

but we thank the Lord for getting off with little damage done, at least compared with what our neighbours have had to put up with.”<sup>7</sup>

### **We will go and take over the Sisters’ house**

“But troops continued to come down from Nam-yung and Chi-hing. Other officers came to ask for lodgings.

‘We have taken over all the Catholic residences in Kiang-si’ they say ‘so why can we not take over this one too?’

“Given their insistence, we were ready to grant them the porter’s lodge where our external teachers usually stay, and thus put an end to the matter.

‘No,’ they replied: ‘we want your house.’ And with shrewd malice added: ‘If you do not give it to us we will go and take over the Sisters’ house.’

“They were aware they were touching on a delicate matter for us. We looked at each other and worked out what we were all thinking: such a villainous proposal only deserved a tough response.

‘We can see we are not dealing with gentlemen, but evil-doers and pirates’ I said in a firm voice. ‘Your words show that clearly. So we are telling you that you will not go to the Sisters and we are no longer offering you the porter’s lodge unless you cease being violent about it. Here we are and the only way you can proceed is by force.

“They understood that they had overstepped the mark. We saw that some of them were beginning to leave the porter’s lodge.

‘We don’t want to upset you’ they said. ‘We will go elsewhere.’

“Only one continued to curse and shout death threats, as if he were possessed by the devil ... Could he have been an apostate Christian or worse? Unfortunately the various Missions in these times had to put up with this, brought about often by these poor unfortunates who had betrayed their duty.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Steady attitudes**

We have reported this episode in its entirety because it is so full of significance. The attitude of absolute resoluteness the bishops took when there was a threat to go to the Sisters’ house is the same he would adopt when the Bolshevik pirates threatened to rape the girls travelling with the missionaries on the day of their martyrdom.

On his final journey the bishop would have an enigmatic discussion with one of the soldiers whom he had prevented from occupying the Mission houses.

Even the final line about apostates, spoken so poignantly, is the result of a long experience of missionary apostolate, full of light and dark shades.

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<sup>7</sup> *Inter Nos*, Anno VIII, no. 1, 15 November 1927, pp. 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Inter Nos*, Anno VIII, no. 1, 15 November 1927, p. 6.

## **A significant news item**

Supplement no. 14, published ten days after the ordinary edition of *Inter Nos* which refers to the occupation attempts we have spoken of, contains a news item that reveals how much sympathy the Salesian Work at Shiu-chow enjoyed, where only the Communists were opposed.

We read in this news sheet: “A Congress was held at Shiu-chow to look at autonomy for the region including Nam-yung, Shiu-chow and Linchow (Nam Shiu Lin). Representatives from the eleven districts took part. We organised a reception in our Institute for Congress members and almost all of them came. Two of the speakers, one from Chi-hing and the other from Nam-yung, said the usual insulting things about Europeans and imperialism; but the other Congress members replied in kind, praising our work unreservedly.

The blatant and inappropriate words from the first two speakers so disgusted the others that they wanted to leave immediately without stopping for refreshments. But the warm and repeated entreaties of the bishop for them to stay won them over. Refreshments were offered in the dining room in the bishop’s house. The warm and friendly service offered by our Vicar Apostolic left a wonderful impression on everyone.

A display of technical work from both the boys and the girls school also spoke eloquently in our favour.

The local papers heaped praise on both our Institute and the band which has been invited to perform at a number of meetings.”<sup>9</sup>

## **The annual report. The difficulty of missionary work**

In the annual report to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, the bishop highlighted the difficulties of missionary work in a society paralysed by the continuous warlike activities and poisoned by Bolshevik propaganda constantly stirring up the people against foreign imperialism.

“They see something suspicious in every foreigner” he writes. “Even our very lack of taking sides, which we clearly show, becomes a reason for greater distrust.

‘You open free schools,’ they say ‘orphanages, shelters, hospitals, clinics, and receive no payment: this is a sign that you are paid by your governments to carry out their interests.’

“This air of suspicion gives rise to the approach taken, the password if you like, by their leaders: no violence toward foreigners but annoy them, give them so much trouble that they will be convinced to go: exorbitant searches of their schools, imposing sectarian speakers, disturbing religious functions, forced occupation of rooms and buildings.

“Hence the constant attempts on the part of the military to occupy Catholic schools, mission residences and even churches to turn them into conference halls, destroying sacred images. In certain regions the poor missionaries have had to live in the same room for months along with the soldiers who have taken over their residence without even leaving a room for them. I will not speak of the personal mistreatment some have been subjected to. News also suggests there have been martyrs.

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<sup>9</sup> *Inter Nos*, Supplement no. 14, 25 November 1927.



“There have been many attempts at occupation in our Mission, especially where buildings are more elegant and comfortable. But thanks to the special protection of the Virgin Help of Christians we have almost always been able to save ourselves ... It is difficult to calculate the disastrous influence all this has had on the generally uneducated people always accustomed to lean on those who are more powerful, for support. Simple people and even some Christians, if not against us because we are foreigners, nevertheless say: The missionaries no longer value our rights; so they are people of little value and it can be of no advantage to follow their teachings.’

“In such sad times, what results can we expect from our missionaries? It is already a marvel that none of them has lost courage, but instead remains in the firing line, even ready to give his life rather than abandon his sheep. Just the same the work, despite being hindered and made so difficult by many hardships, is not lacking in producing results, and despite the situation, we can say they are far better than in earlier years.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The splendid testimony given by the missionaries. Harmony and good spirit**

The bishop then lists the works and the work done in each, in Shiu-chow and the districts.

In a letter to the Rector Major, Fr Rinaldi, on 7 November 1927 accompanying this report he writes: “We hope things will gradually change for the better. For these poor pagans it is no small matter to see that while all the Protestants have withdrawn, we have stayed at our post. They have interpreted this as a sign of our trust in them. So we hope it will help them approach us.”<sup>11</sup>

A month and a half later, again in a letter to Fr Rinaldi on 22 December, he adds: “At the moment we still going strong and continue working. although the work is being daily hindered on all sides. The only thing that still consoles us from a human perspective is, in general, the harmony and good spirit of the confreres. If we have to suffer, we do so together; if someone has to put up with some deprivation, we all share it. This is of great comfort, encourages us to work and make sacrifices. Over these days we have been a bit more perplexed than usual because of some subversive elements who have fled Canton and come here. There is no danger of anything serious; but they can cause us some disturbance. At any rate we are calm, continuing with our life which is to do good to everyone in everything we possibly can.”<sup>12</sup>

The best promoter of this “harmony and good spirit of the confreres” was he himself by his wise and balanced governance and his prudence, perfect self-control, and his humility and kindness.

“In the meetings held after the retreat,” one of his missionaries writes “the bishop discussed the problems of the Mission with all of us, using the approach we today call ‘dialogue’. We took part with a freedom that today might be called ‘contestation’ (challenge!). Once one of the missionaries, one of the more visible ones, speaking about the constant financial straits which slowed down so many beautiful initiatives, lost control of himself and said in a disdainful and offensive tone: ‘The bishop has the money but he doesn’t want to spend it!’ The silence that followed this unfortunate remark and the even more unfortunate tone he said it in highlighted its seriousness.

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<sup>10</sup> Annual Report for 1926–27, Arch. Sal. 9, 5, Vers.

<sup>11</sup> *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>12</sup> *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

“The bishop, who was not exactly meek by temperament nor by nature slow to respond, just listened without changing his customary serenity, bowed his head as if he wanted to ask forgiveness for the incident, and kept quiet. After a few moments, calm dialogue resumed as if nothing had happened. The episode was buried forever, leaving no trace in his approach to everyone and each of his dear missionaries whom he continued to love as the apple of his eye, with no shadow of distinction.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Memorie di Don Pietro Pomati*, 15 February 1974, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

## WORTHY SONS OF SUCH A FATHER

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### The Don Bosco Institute at Shiu-chow

The good father was going strong and his sons were good imitators of him. In all the residences they had to put up with the same difficulties and the same suffering in order to save the Christian flock.

Don Bosco Institute, too, had its problems which the Rector, Fr Carlo Braga, sums up in some fine pages in his testimony for the canonical process for recognising the martyrdom of his two confreres

#### **The missionary was respected and loved**

“Since my arrival in the Mission in 1919,” he writes “and until 1926 in the cities of Shiu-chow, Canton and Lin-chow, as well as throughout the Vicariate, the missionary enjoyed the respect and esteem of the authorities. He was also able to wield great influence among the mercenary soldiers.

“Our residences were a safe and inviolable refuge. Christians and pagans alike took refuge there during wars or the perils of invasion by pirates. The Catholic Church flag was a safeguard against occupation by militias.

“The words Tin Tchu Tong (Catholic Mission) were like a flag under which everyone was safe from anything. Missionaries were received deferentially by the authorities; they were treated respectfully by other important people. Being a pupil at a school run by the missionaries was considered a privilege and an honour. The title ‘Catholic’ was often sufficient to be free of harassment and abuse.

“During the frequent raids made by soldiers looking for luggage bearers, it was enough for the men being sought to take refuge either in the church or the missionaries’ residence or any house that bore the words "Catholic Mission" for them to be left in peace.

“In 1920 the son, still a pagan, of a Christian woman was captured by the soldiers and they wanted to force him to go to another city carrying munitions and victuals. When I was told this by the distraught mother, I went looking for the lad who was captured. I found him already enlisted, in among the troops and was able to bring him back to his home without encountering any problems from the soldiers.

“In August 1921, having sent our orphans in Ho-sai to help Christians with the rice harvest, I gave each one a medal. The soldiers captured one of the stronger boys and tied him to the mast of their large boat. I came to his aid. He was immediately released to me and Colonel Tseng severely punished the soldiers who had taken the boy.

“Another time I was called urgently by one of our day students from the orphanage at Ho-sai, to free his dad who had been condemned to death. I ran to help the poor man who had been tied up and forced to his knees, ready for the firing squad. I exchanged a few words with the Commander. It was enough for me to say that I knew this man for the punishment to be lifted immediately and for him to be set free.

“So, when soldiers went out armed to steal vegetables from the gardens, pigs from the pen or chickens from the roost, it was enough to hear the voice of a missionary for them to cease their ill-doing.

“In our first residence at Shiu-chow, the *Sin Tung Mun* (New East Gate), we looked after Colonel Tseng a few times along with his family. His political opponents sought to have him put to death, and this was the case too for Mandarin Wong, a Catholic, and then the Mandarin of Shiu-chow, Tehoi. And despite the place of their refuge being well-known, no one dared disturb them because they were the guests of the missionaries.

“There are solid testimonies and irrefutable facts to prove this privileged situation.”<sup>1</sup>

### **The first Communist cell in Shiu-chow**

“In Shiu-chow, Bolshevism appeared in the summer of 1926, the work of the propaganda school run by General Chang Keiyan.

“During the holidays that year officers working at the school found a dozen or so of the most troublesome students in the city. They were able to attract them with games, celebrations, amusements, walks, then with conferences filled with hatred against foreigners, playing on their feelings of patriotic love. Among the foreigners indicated as being oppressors of China they pointed out the missionaries in particular. From that first Communist cell soon other propaganda schools arose, openly atheistic and Bolshevik. There were two such schools, well attended by students who all boarded, were subsidised and kept by Communists during their course. One school was meant for workers and farmers, the other for students, businessmen and the average middle class. Popular publications, posters and almost daily news sheets, illustrated magazines, wall posters and large cartoons on cloth constantly encouraged the populace to revolt. Large meetings often with thousands of listeners, stirred up hatred for the foreigner in everyone and aversion for followers of Christianity.

“As for the behaviour of the civil authorities, I need to note, to their honour, that at least in Shiu-chow, they played a purely passive and unwilling part, especially when is involved Catholic missionaries. Sometimes they also came to our defence.

“But in 1927, now that Communism was established, in order not to compromise themselves the authorities refused the gifts we would normally give them at Christmas time. They also would not

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<sup>1</sup> *Summ.* pp. 162-163.

give us audiences no matter how often we asked and begged them to. Our many friends and acquaintances refused to greet us.”<sup>2</sup>

### **A Communist cell in the Don Bosco Institute. Communist violence**

“The Bolsheviks often tried to organise a Communist cell in the Don Bosco Institute: and succeeded in summer 1926, at the beginning of their activities. The victims of this were a group of pagan day students.<sup>3</sup> They were the first to hold conferences for our pupils during study time in the evening. But they soon tired of the firm and resolute behaviour of our boys and would have left with broken bones had the Superiors not prevented this from happening.

“The Communists concentrated their satanic hatred especially on the feast of Christmas, organising rallies and parades of people bearing arms. The posters and speeches on such occasions were full of blasphemies, heresies and death threats made against followers of Christianity

“The propagandists entered violently, defended by armed troops, into religious schools, and the pupils were forced to listen to the evil speeches from these emissaries.

“In January 1927, an armed patrol of propagandists entered our pro-cathedral during the afternoon service. It is due to the spirited presence of the missionaries, and the obedience of the Christians and pupils who immediately went out into the various courtyards, that the church was not profaned by the blasphemies of those devils incarnate. Seeing the listeners flee, they followed them with their bayonets to bring together in one courtyard. I threw a ball in among the pupils; but the assailants levelled their rifles threateningly. Providentially, an attendant of General Chang Keiyan arrived, and gave the order for the troops to return to their barracks.

“Bolshevik hatred was vented especially against the Don Bosco school.

“At rallies or in private meetings the watchword was: Down with the Laikuan (the Chinese name for the Don Bosco school).

“At plays in the theatre which were put on by the Communists there were constant hints against us. There were obscene mockeries of religious services the pupils would take part in. On one wall in front of the entrance to the school they painted slogans and anti-Christian cartoons, inviting the pupils to abandon the school. At the end of the road a few metres from the school entrance, two large posters on waterproof cloth said “Whoever enters a Catholic school is burying his intelligence. Whoever goes to a Catholic school is a lapdog of the foreigners.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Resistance by pupils at Don Bosco**

“Using a renegade Protestant teacher, the Communists handed out personal invitations to abandon our school and enrol in theirs, where they would find food, lodgings and free education. On another occasion the same emissary gave out forms to be filled in and sent to Soviet central. These had some insidious questions to answer: ‘How do the missionaries treat you? What do they say about China? Do they force you to pray? Do they leave you absolutely free?’

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<sup>2</sup> *Summ.* pp. 163–164. On the reasons for rejecting the greeting see Chapter 16, section on ‘Xenophobia and atheism’.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 17, footnote 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Summ.* pp. 164–165.

“None of the pupils left the school nor replied to the referendum.

“This resoluteness upset the adversaries. They then moved on to more vulgar insults and threats. At a National Party meeting one speaker repeatedly called for the closure of our school, but among applause from the Bolsheviks came the authoritative voice of Colonel Tang who defended us and our work.

“More than once our teachers were given death threats on posters stuck up along the streets. And threatening letters were another way they sought to dissuade them from teaching

“In the local newspaper and with an illustrated pamphlet they accused the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians of killing babies at the Holy Infancy so they could take out their eyes and hearts to make medicines to send to Europe.”<sup>5</sup>

“Bishop Versiglia had taken photographs of the elderly and inmates at the Hospice in order to send copies to benefactors. A young Bolshevik who found the photos began a bitter campaign through the newspapers, with the accusation that these photos were displayed in public gardens in Europe to cast contempt and ridicule on China.

“Very frequently over the three years there were attempts by Communists to occupy our schools. Their only success was once at Ho-sai,<sup>6</sup> and a second time at the bishop’s residence.”<sup>7</sup>

“One evening, ringleaders of the movement came to disrupt the prayers that were being said in the courtyard. Having arrived too late they stopped at our office harassing us with bad words and searches. One was a particularly sad case: he turned to the Crucifix on the wall and said: “You should be broken and crushed.” And he sneered satanically. This blasphemer was later torn apart when a hidden mine exploded.

“Proselytism by the Bolsheviks was so vehement that at one meeting just for students, the leader, Liu Paosan, ended his fervent speech thus: “Young Chinese, it is time to leave behind your indolence, your apathy; you need to openly get behind our Party. Go back home and tell your parents you have chosen us. If they oppose you, kill them. Yes, I say again, kill them.”<sup>8</sup>

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5 *Summ.* pp. 165-166. Similar accusations were made, posted on walls, picturing the missionaries hammering the cross into the people’s brain and the Sisters as gouging out the eyes of children to make medicine to send to Europa (*Summ.* p. 265). The strange and absurd accusation of “gouging out eyes” is not a new one in Chinese history. We already find it in an official document, the edict of tolerance by Emperor Tao-Kuang on behalf of Christianity in China, 14 December 1844: “The introduction of this religion into China goes back three centuries ... Measures were later taken against Chinese who used the Christian religion to evade national jurisdiction and commit crimes: seducing women, removing the eyes of sick people etc. ...” (Cf. L. Wei Tsing-Sing, *La politique missionnaire de la France en Chine*, Paris 1957, p. 335). A sad case of twenty children’s corpses found at the Holy Infancy of the Dominican Sisters at Foo-chow in Fu-kien in March 1927 gave rise to a violent and unjust anti-Christian campaign, as told by C. Costantini, *Con i missionari in Cina*, Rome 1946, pp. 396-397.

6 On 13 December 1927 a group of around a hundred soldiers broke down the door to St Joseph’s Church in Ho-sai to take up residence there. The officer in command of the group told Fr Larena: “Look, Father, since we will be sleeping here, it is not good for ‘that thing over there’ (and he pointed to the tabernacle with the Eucharist) to stay here.” Fr Larena put on a cotta and stole and consumed the consecrated hosts, while the officer kept the soldiers back with a whip so they could not see what the priest was doing. “We should note” Fr Larena said “that in everything else the official was quite irrational. Could he have been a poor apostate?” The soldiers strayed more than a week despite repeated orders from their General to remove themselves. The charity of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians did much to pacify their wild nature; each day they spent more than two hours among the soldiers treating their wounds and sores. The soldiers had deep respect for them. They called the Sisters and when they came even the officers ceased giving orders so the Sisters could carry out their work of charity (*Inter Nos*, Anno VIII, no. 2, p. 4, 4 January 1928).

7 They spent just one night on the verandah and in the refectory. See above.

8 Confirming this episode, Fr Giovanni Guarona notes that often parents had no idea what these schools were like, and witnessed their children being turned into real propagandists who went from mere blandishments to threats and reprisals. He adds: “The Chinese people by nature are timid and allow themselves easily to be overruled. A good number of farms were thus turned into places for the new Party and into propaganda offices” (*Inter Nos*, Anno VII, no. 2, 15 January. 1927).

“An established topic for admission to the propaganda school was: “Show that God does not exist.” A second was: “Religion is the irreconcilable enemy of science and progress “ A third was: “Man descended from monkeys.”

“As councillors these schools had expert Russian propagandists. In November 1926 one of them ended his violent address with these words: “Until all the churches and missionaries are destroyed, our program cannot be put in place.”

“Our residence at Tong-tong was taken over by Communists who indecently dirtied pictures and crucifixes, and wrote lurid and blasphemous words on the walls.

“Since we remained faithful to the program drawn up for us at the beginnings of the Mission by the then Fr Versiglia, “Do good to all, evil to no one”, generally both the people and the authorities surrounded us with respect, affection and gave us their children to educate, so much so that the boys school at Don Bosco, along with the other branch at Ho-sai, reached 385 pupils during the time Bolshevism was raging.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The student association and pupils at Don Bosco and the Institute of Mary Help of Christians**

“In Shiu-chow a students association had been set up, which declared itself to be neutral in matters of religion; but it soon took on a completely Bolshevik program. All schools, including confessional ones, were obliged to set up a section and send their leaders several times a month to meetings of the general association ... Representatives of the students at Don Bosco Institute and girls at the Mary Help of Christians Institute often succeeded in softening the subversive tone but never became members of the leadership group made up of 24 members.

“In September 1927, hearing a rumour that the students association was preparing for a large anti-Christian rally at Christmas that year, I advised our pupils and the girls, together with two Protestant schools, to be part of the leadership.

“The elections gave 18 positions to ours and 6 to the others. So as not to win overwhelmingly, ours left the presidency and other roles to 6 Communists. But strong in numbers and even more so good motivation, they prevented the smaller assemblies and also the general assemblies from degenerating into anti-Christian demonstrations. It became a struggle of ideas, lively political debate but ours always came out victorious, so much so that they brought most of the pagan schools with them.

“The Communist students then appealed to help from Bolshevik speakers who had their military forces quartered outside the city. These tried to shake the invincible strength of ours through eloquence and threats. At the assembly held in December 1927, which lasted from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m., our boys and girls faced up to all their opponents and managed to have an anti-Christian demonstration cancelled.

“What struck the adversaries most was the behaviour and power of argument of our students, both the younger and the older ones, so much so that both the military and the students that the older ones among our group were not students but teachers.

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<sup>9</sup> *Summ.* pp. 165–167. In 1929 Don Bosco College reached its peak of 470 pupils (Cf. M. Rassiga, *L'Opera Salesiana in Cina*, Part II, Aberdeen Technical School, Hong-kong 1974, p. 65).

“The anti-Christian demonstration held at Christmas 1927 saw an insignificant little group of about a dozen demonstrators.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Courage and strength of Thong Su Lien Maria**

“It was on this occasion that a student from the Mary Help of Christians Institute, Thong Su Lien Maria, one of the three girls for whom Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario gave their lives, stood out for her courage and Christian resolve.”<sup>11</sup>

“Some of the officers whose job was to keep her quiet, never let her out of their sight,” Fr Braga adds.<sup>12</sup>

On of the pirates he held Thong Su Lien prisoner, would recall the lively discussions he had with her at Shiu-chow.<sup>13</sup>

“These people wielding new ideas” writes the Principal at the Mary Help of Christians Institute “came to our school some times and also gave us a gift, which we didn’t want, of a visit on Christmas Day, just at dinner time when our boarders were gathered together all happy. They had to suspend lunch and put up with their arguments which they replied to courageously, confusing them. This was the older girls and especially Thong Su Lien Maria, who was the most courageous although only recently baptised.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Mission residence as a refuge for the persecuted**

On 21 March 1928, Bishop Versiglia wrote to Fr Rinaldi:

“Our more central residences, especially in Shiu-chow city, are literally besieged by Christian refugees stripped of everything by Communist groups. Our boys and girls schools too have doubled the numbers of inmates. These poor people have to find a place for them and keep them there until they have no means of sustenance, at least to stop them perishing from exhaustion, cold and hunger.

“Amid so much turmoil and harassment the confreres are all acting with great courage and self-deprivation to help out and comfort the poor Christians. Those who had the most opportunity to display their zeal and spirit of sacrifice were our Fr Cucchiara at Yan-fà, Fr Bardelli at Lok-chong and, as I write, Fr Dalmasso at Nam-yung. In these three places the Communists are trying to really set up an independent *soviet*, and unfortunately the regular army has not succeeded yet in dominating this situation.

“We too have had to suffer the devastation of some of our residences taken over suddenly while the missionary was absent; nevertheless we recognise the protection of our Blessed Mother over us and ours.

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10 *Summ.* pp. 174–175.

11 Testimony of Fr Carlo Braga *Summ.* pp. 175.

12 *Summ.* p. 267.

13 Sworn testimony of Thong Su Lien, *Summ.* p. 224.

14 Testimony of Sr Elena Bottini, *Summ.* p. 306. Su Lien was baptised on Christmas Eve 1926 and was given the names Maria and Angela (*Inter Nos*, Anno VII, no. 1, p. 3 1 January 1927).



“Help us also with your prayers to thank our Mother in Heaven and make us ever more worthy of her protection.”<sup>15</sup>

In his letter to Fr Rinaldi, the bishop notes how Bolshevism was raging in the districts of Yan-fà and Lok-chong. He makes a careful and generic reference to this also in the Annual report on 2 October 1928.<sup>16</sup> We find more extensive news in *Inter Nos*,<sup>17</sup> and in a small work published by the missionary who was then at Yan-fa.<sup>18</sup>

Bands and Communist soldiers came through stealing, setting fire to buildings and killing the wealthy and chiefs in the towns. “The Farmers Society”, organised by Russian emissaries and backed by Communist soldiers, attacked the houses of the rich and plundered them. People’s courts, on just the merest indication from any citizen, condemned people to death if accused of wealth. At Tong tong in the Yan-fa district on 13 December 1927, 43 people were killed. Property boundaries and written agreements on this in the countryside were abolished. Some property owners were forced to hand over their documents of ownership which were then publicly burned. Soldiers occupied the church and mission residence at Tong-tong, took the better items away, profaned sacred vessels, trod on and broke the Crucifix and scribbled wicked,evil and immoral things on the walls. The same regiment of soldiers laid waste and profaned the church at Leu-hà, in the Lok-chong district.

Many Christian families suffered the same fate as the others, worse because they were Christians, a description in these districts synonymous with being the lapdogs of foreigners to influence national Chinese politics. Persecuted and stripped of everything, they had to flee and seek shelter elsewhere, begging for a bowl of rice to survive.

The mission residences at Shiu-chow were overflowing with refugees. St Joseph’s College at Ho-sai and the Don Bosco Institute at Shiu-chow had almost doubled in numbers of people taking shelter there. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had done the same for women and children. The Elderly People’s Home at Sin Tung Mun (New East Gate), was packed beyond belief trying to prevent these poor people from dying of cold and hunger on the street.

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15 *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

16 *Annual Reports*, Arch. Sal. 9, 5, Vers.

17 *Inter Nos*, Anno VIII, no. 3, 14 February 1928, pp. 4-5.

18 G. Cucchiara, *Tre anni di bolscevismo in Cina*, Florence, 1931, pp. 15–27.

## AT THE SUMMIT. HEROIC VIRTUES

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### **A light that grows until it reaches the splendour of martyrdom**

We began by describing the life of Bishop Versiglia earlier as an ardent aspiration to acquire the virtues needed to be a good missionary, and then as a constant sacrifice for the salvation of souls: it is a line which heads upward, a light that grows until it reaches the splendour of martyrdom.

This light grows through acts of profound humility, detachment from self, a life lived in God, and one of sacrificing self for others. It is highlighted over the final two years we are examining (1928-29), in which these virtues reach their peak. All witnesses agree in saying that he was a saint, and that martyrdom was the reward for and crowning of a life that was entirely saintly.

### **Life in God**

“Over the final years of his life, I noticed a renewed spiritual fervour in him,” Fr Braga writes “a more careful preparation for the holy Mass and meditation. I know precisely that he wrote his resolutions and observations of an ascetic kind in a little notebook. There was great calm about him, joined with absolute self-mastery, a spirit of continuous union with God shone through in his words and demeanour.”<sup>1</sup>

“His life could be called a Eucharistic life” says his secretary Fr. “When he was not at his desk in his room, we knew where to find him: in the church, before the Blessed Sacrament. Summer and winter, hot or cold, well or indisposed, at five in the morning he was always up and a few minutes later he was always the first to appear before the Prisoner of love. He left the church at seven, and was back there before noon, then at two for the canonical hours and in the evening for prayers. He would go to his room for a short meditation. It was a practice he recommended to everyone. He felt that the day had ended badly if he did not do it.”<sup>2</sup>

“During the celebration of the holy Mass,” Fr Braga goes on to say “which he never omitted, not even during the most uncomfortable and tedious journeys, he most very exact in the rubrics, recollected, devout and edifying ... He wanted the Mission to be dedicated to the Help of Christians, to whom he was so devoted, and which came from the very heart of Don Bosco ... The

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<sup>1</sup> *Summ.* p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> *Summ.* p. 19.

links on the chain of his pectoral cross were made to resemble the rosary. He did not have it just as an ornament, either, but would run it devoutly through his fingers, saying the rosary every day. During his apostolic trips he said it uninterruptedly. Once when I asked him for a reminder, on 11 February 1920 he wrote: “A missionary without devotion to Mary is nothing.”<sup>3</sup>

### **He was a saint, even without martyrdom**

Sr Palmira Parri, Superior of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians at Shiu-chow, had been assistant to the FMA novices at Genzano in 1903–1904. She had known Fr Versiglia when he was Rector and novice master and had often heard his sermons or when he preached retreats.

She recalls: “I remember him preaching a retreat to us at the Provincial House in Rome. He had such a modest demeanour that he never once raised his eyes ... Speaking of him, of course, we called him ‘Saint Luigi’. Even without martyrdom as the reason, I am convinced that Bishop Versiglia was a saint; and I believe that precisely because of his virtue, the Lord granted him the grace of martyrdom.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1923, Sr Parri led the first group of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to leave for China. They made the voyage with Bishop Versiglia and admired his reserve.

“In my early years as superior,” she continues “I often went to him for advice and always found him humble, upright, and only wanting the glory of God.

“On one occasion, when I expressed one of my wishes to him, he replied:

‘Sister Superior, how is it that you still have wishes?’

‘And you, Bishop,’ I replied ‘Do you not have any?’

“And then, taking up the viewpoint he sometimes had and which seemed inspired, he told me:

‘Yes, I only want to do something for the glory of God.’<sup>5</sup>

“In food and drink he was so abstemious” Sr Parri continues. “He came two or three times a week from Shiu-chow to Ho-sai for conferences and catechism for the catechist pupils, from 1-2 p.m., in summer walking under an umbrella or sunshade. I invited him to take some refreshments. At the beginning he took a little coffee. But then he told me:

‘Do not prepare it for me any more unless I ask you to.’ And from then on he took nothing, not even a drop of water.

“I really believe that he offered himself as a victim for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. I often heard him say: ‘What do you want, Sister Superior, we are old, we have to let others do things; we have to be content to pray.’

“On the Saturday before his final pastoral visit which he never concluded, I had come back from Hong Kong, where I had heard him criticised for his way of acting in something that was not true. When I encouraged the bishop to act he gave me an answer in which it seemed to me he was saying

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<sup>3</sup> *Summ.* pp. 154–155. This is one of the “five commandments of the missionary” mentioned earlier. The signed image containing them was kept by Fr Braga.

<sup>4</sup> *Summ.* p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> *Summ.* pp. 95-96.

that he could better help the Mission from Paradise, and I really had the impression that he had offered himself as a victim.

The following day, during the usual sermon on Sunday afternoon in the church at Ho-sai, he encouraged us facetiously, hinting that he was about to undertake a very long journey perhaps as far as Peking, and that perhaps he would not be returning. It seemed that he had a premonition about something, and it seemed to me that he had asked the Lord to take government of the Vicariate from him.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Following the suffering Christ. Spiked belt and discipline**

Earlier, we said that during the stopover that the bishop made with the Salesians in San Francisco, California, one Coadjutor confrere in charge of fixing up his room had found an object which was certainly an instrument of penance.

The Provicar, Fr Guarona, who was at Bishop Versiglia’s side throughout his time as bishop writes: “Already a long time before his glorious end, I was deeply impressed by the life of faith, piety and the spirit of sacrifice of Bishop Versiglia. What struck me was seeing him some mornings, his face haggard, eyes red and his body sagging. I often wondered if he engaged in special acts of mortification, if he carried a spiked belt or discipline to obtain special graces from the Lord on the Mission and its missionaries; more so because he was in constant contact with the Carmel in Florence and spoke enthusiastically about the life of the Carmelite Sisters. He considered them to be the angels of the Mission since they had agreed to offer themselves as victims for the Vicariate of Shiu-chow. These doubts became certainty when, after his death, I went as was my duty to his room and found a discipline soaked in blood, well hidden and locked in a particular drawer.”<sup>7</sup>

“Being in the bishop’s residence at Shiu-chow,” writes Fr Bartolomeo Fochesato “at times at night I heard some noises as if someone was beating themselves. One day, after I had heard such noises during the night, I went to Bishop Versiglia’s bedroom and found a towel soaked in blood, and I thought I saw drops of blood on one side of a wardrobe in the same room.”<sup>8</sup>

“I usually received the bishop’s personal linen already cleaned” Sr Parri tells us. “I believe he washed it himself before sending it to us in the laundry. But once, when he had to leave for a pastoral visit, he asked me to tidy up his room a bit during his absence. I found his bathrobe still soaked in fresh blood from around the shoulder area. I thought it was not the result of blisters because the blood was clean. But I did not make a fuss about it. Only later, after his death when the instruments of penance were found, was I able to explain the fact.”<sup>9</sup>

Fr Larena, Bishop Versiglia’s secretary, explains that the discipline was found in a locked drawer and that the only key could not be found. The lock had to be forced. The discipline was made of seven cords about forty centimetres in length. Each cord had three knots and at the end, about eight centimetres long, the bishop had wrapped a steel thread to make it heavier and make it more suited to causing bruises and cuts. The cords were still stained with blood. The spiked belt the bishop wore around his waist and the wooden planks tied together like a mat, which he put on his bed so he

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6 *Summ.* pp. 96–97.

7 *Summ.* pp. 181–182.

8 *Summ.* p. 131.

9 *Summ.* p. 96.

could suffer while asleep were found accidentally, more than a year after his death, under the frame of his bed.<sup>10</sup>

“Often, joking with Bishop Versiglia,” Fr Larena tells us “I happened to bump him or put a hand on his shoulder. I saw him make a sudden gesture like someone who has been pricked with something. Then I heard him excuse himself saying: ‘You touched a nerve.’ I understood everything when I saw the spiked belt and in particular a pectoral cross made of soft metal thread, all covered with barbs on the inside part, and held together with a chain of barbed wire that went around his shoulders and around his neck.”<sup>11</sup>

“At times the bishop lifted his shoulders like someone in pain and gave long sighs like someone suffering” writes Fr Fochesato. When I sometimes asked him, ‘what is wrong, bishop? Why these long sighs?’, he replied ‘So? I breathe better this way.’<sup>12</sup>

### **Austere with himself, generous and charitable with others**

Austere with himself, he was, instead, generous, obliging and very gentle with others.

“While initially he gladly took a cup of coffee to help his digestion” writes Fr Fochesato “in the last period of his life he even abstained from that. at times he invited me to go with him, saying: ‘Let’s go to Sin Tung Mun (New East Gate), the old residence, now set up as a shelter for the elderly and an orphanage.’”

“When the bishop came to the orphanage and the rest home for the elderly,” Sr Elena Bottini noted “he knew how to treat people with such loving-kindness and friendliness that the children besieged him, and for the elderly it was a celebration because each one received a word of comfort that came from the heart.”<sup>13</sup>

“When the visit was over,” Fr Fochesato continues “while I was having a cup of coffee, he said to the Sister who was offering him one: ‘You drink it for me’ and he abstained from it.”

“In this regard I recall” Fr Francesco Ruffini tells us “ that knowing how much I liked coffee, the bishop gave me the gift of a small machine for espresso coffee, made in Italy, telling me jokingly: ‘When I come to visit you at your residence, you will make me a good cup of coffee.’”<sup>14</sup>

“One night the year I spent at Shiu-chow with Bishop Versiglia, 1928,” Fr Ruffini continues “I had a very strong toothache and was forced to go to leave the room and walk out on the balcony at the bishop’s house, but a long way from the Bishop’s room. All of a sudden I saw him in front of me, dressed fully as he would be during the day. I asked myself how it could be that we were both

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10 *Summ.* p. 20.

11 Cf. G. Bosio, *Mons. Versiglia e Don Caravario, Testimonianze sull'eccidio di Li Tow Tsui*, Turin 1935, p. 24.

12 *Summ.* p. 131. In the Museum of Salesian Relics kept in the Mother House in Turin we also find preserved: a) The discipline (or scourge), as we have described it. But it only has five cords, while another unused version found among Bishop Versiglia’s documents in the Salesian Central archives at the Generalate in Rome has seven cords, as do the instruments used by the discaled Carmelite Sisters, from whom the bishop certainly received these two. Fr Larena tells us that of the missing cords was one he gave as relic in 1930 to Bishop Paolo Dumond, Vicar Apostolic of Kan-chow, and the other to the Daughters of Charity in Kiang-si. b) Three hair-shirts made of metal threads four centimetres wide. On one side there are spikes. There is a hook so both sides can be latched and make a painful belt out of. c) The pectoral cross we have described, made of the same net of metal threads. d) A small mat made of six wooden strips about fifty centimetres wide. At the two ends they are tied together, not far apart, by a small piece of string so as to form a small mat which the bishop placed on the planks he slept on.

13 *Summ.* pp. 302–303.

14 *Summ.* p. 42.

walking at the same time. Finding out about my toothache, he took me to his room, gave me some medicine and then his blessing and sent me back to bed. To my surprise I went to sleep immediately.”<sup>15</sup>

The same Fr Ruffini was in Shanghai two years after Bishop Versiglia’s death. Assailed by a strong migraine he remembered the toothache he had had at Shiu-chow, and turned in faith to Bishop Versiglia, asking him to free him of the migraine he found hard to bear. He was heard almost immediately and freed from his painful suffering.<sup>16</sup>

Returning to times past in the Vicariate of Shiu-chow, and precisely to 1929, Fr Ruffini continues:

“Once I came to Shiu-chow from my residence at Nam-yung, I don’t remember for what tasks. Since I am not a horse rider, on my return journey I had to use the public boat which left very early in the morning and from a point rather a long way from our residence. There was a considerable walk on foot. Regretfully I had to forgo celebrating Mass. When I went to say goodbye to the bishop, I told him of my embarrassment, just by way of information.

‘Go to bed’ he told me ‘and sleep peacefully. At two in the morning I will knock on the door of your room until I get an answer.’

“And in fact he did come to wake me, and I went with him to his private chapel where he had already prepared everything we needed. He served my Mass and then went with me to the refectory where I found coffee and breakfast already prepared. and so I was able to reach the departure point in all tranquillity.”<sup>17</sup>

### **A power went out of him**

“He showed really motherly attention to his missionaries” Fr Braga writes. “He visited them when they were sick, and personally looked after them, as I myself experienced one time when I was ill.”<sup>18</sup>

“In 1925,” Fr Braga continues “during the night I was suddenly attacked by spasms due to kidney stones. as much as I tried to hide my pain, Bishop Versiglia became aware of it and was immediately at the bedside to comfort and bless me. Every time he placed his hands on my head and held me while I vomited, I felt relieved of all pain. He did not leave me until the spasms had stopped. Fr Ernesto Foglio was there. as soon as the bishop went back to his room I felt the need to tell my confrere of my inner wonder: ‘You know, Fr Foglio, when the bishop touched me, *virtus de ilio exibat*: a power came out of him” (Lev 6:19).”<sup>19</sup>

“He had great charity,” attests his secretary, Fr Larena “that urged him to be the servant of his missionaries: he cut their hair, and was with them day and night when they were sick.”<sup>20</sup>

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15 *Summ.* pp. 426–427.

16 *Summ.* p. 439.

17 *Summ.* p. 427.

18 *Summ.* p. 320. On 28 December 1923, Bishop Versiglia wrote to Fr Rinaldi: “Confusing exhaustion and physical ills ... with simple discouragement ... I don’t believe it is so easy, especially on my part, that for around four months I have been nurse to one or other of the confreres.”

19 *Summ.* pp. 357–358.

20 *Summ.* p. 5.

One photograph, published in the magazine of the Sino-Vietnamese Province *Newsletter*, in March 1974 and by the *Salesian Bulletin* in August-September the same year, shows Bishop Versiglia, with a long and luxurious beard, cutting Fr Braga's hair with scissors. Fr Braga is smiling contentedly.<sup>21</sup>

### **If the Lord wants a victim, I am ready**

“In April 1929, as on other occasions in 1928,” Fr Braga tells us again “Bishop Versiglia said to me: ‘At most I will have two more years to live.’”

In that same month, at his observation: ‘I am already old and no longer capable of anything’, I replied: ‘Actually today, given that Bolshevism has done so much damage, we need your work of reconstruction more than ever. We are all young and naive, so we need your mature experience.’

“He cut me off, saying:

‘I hope to help you from Paradise. It is not melancholy or sadness of life that urges me to say this: I just feel I will not last long.’

‘Bishop,’ I said once more, ‘you have returned from America a new man and are in better health than ten years ago.’

‘They are just appearances. I do not delude myself,’ he replied, and going to the desk he took his will he was preparing and showed me.”<sup>22</sup>

“While Communism was raging, he was always afraid, and with good reason, of some tragic event; because some residences or chapels had been taken over by the rebels, and the life of the confreres, of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Christians themselves and catechumens were in danger, he said to me more than once: “If a victim is necessary for the Vicariate, I ask the Lord to take me.”<sup>23</sup>

“In 1929, when I went to say goodbye to him before leaving for Italy to be at the Beatification of Don Bosco, he told me these precise words: “If the Lord wants a victim for the good of the Mission, I am ready.”<sup>24</sup>

“Often and on various occasions,” Fr Ruffini attests “he had told me of his desire to be a martyr for the faith.”<sup>25</sup>

“He was very humble” adds Fr Fochesato. “Especially in the last years of his life, he thought he was a useless human being who only remained on this earth in order to increase his debt to the Lord; and he expressed his desire to leave for Paradise ... In my view, I have always thought of him as a saint.”<sup>26</sup>

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21 *Newsletter of the Salesian Sino-Vietnamese Province, Hong-kong, March 1974*. The caption for the photo says it probably goes back to 1920 and was taken in the first mission residence at New East Gate, *Sin Tung Mun*.

22 *Summ.* pp. 171-172.

23 *Summ.* p. 156.

24 *Summ.* p. 267.

25 *Summ.* p. 431.

26 *Summ.* p. 132.

## **Four hundred kilometres for an act of fraternal charity**

On 17 April 1928, Bishop Versiglia, accompanied by Fr Dalmasso, left for Kan-chow in Kiang-si, to be at the episcopal consecration of Bishop John O'Shea, of the Congregation of Priests of the Mission (Vincentians), Americans.

“A warm and kind invitation from Mons. O’Shea, bishop-elect of Kan-chow,” the bishop writes “meant that I was concerned to ensure that I was at his consecration. The distance is about 400 kilometres; it was rainy season and the road was not very safe. Nevertheless I could not, without harming the spirit of fraternity, say no to this opportunity to pay homage to our closest brothers who have already given us so much proof of their exquisite friendship. I left on horseback with our confrere Fr Dalmasso.”<sup>27</sup>

He took advantage of the trip to Nam-yung to make a pastoral visit to one of the neighbouring communities which Fr Dalmasso looked after. He then went on through mountainous and poor regions.

Four bishops were waiting for him at the episcopal residence in Kan-chow, and they thanked the Vicar Apostolic of Shiu-chow for having undertaken such a long and tiring journey to honour the Family of St Vincent. They remained at Kan-chow for three days.

In one of his reports, Fr Dalmasso writes: “Bishop Versiglia was constantly sought after for some or other function. And he made himself kindly available ... There were many who insisted that our dear Bishop should stay longer, since they found him so much at hand, so friendly, so Salesian. But unfortunately the day after the consecration, 2 May, the bishop wanted to leave to be in Nam-yung for Sunday 6 May. One of the Vincentian Fathers, Father Stauble, a proven missionary of the region, accompanied us. They were four days of uninterrupted effort. On the evening of 5 May, we were very happy to arrive, very tired, at Kam-kong, near Nam-yung. On Sunday 6 May, the bishop confirmed some fifteen Christians, preached, heard confessions, and had the youngsters around him all day, as if he were well rested. Father Stauble, who is also a proven and well trained missionary was so much in admiration of him.”<sup>28</sup>

## **Sacrifices to win souls**

One characteristic that stands out in the life of Bishop Versiglia the missionary is this: activity without truce, rugged, enervating, unsettling. Some of his letters to the Carmel in Florence were written, we could say, from the trenches; yet the transcendent serenity of a Trappist monastery transpires from them. The man of action and the mystic had achieved a unity in his person through his habitual union with God.

Once back in Schiu-chow after the journey to Kiang-si, the bishop found a letter from the Carmel in Florence, and replied on 15 May 1928.

“Reverend Mother, dearest in Christ,

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<sup>27</sup> *Boll. Sal.* April 1929, p. 112; a broad description in *Inter Nos*, Anno VIII, no. 8, 31 July 1928; no. 9, 31 August 1928; no. 10, 30 September 1928.

<sup>28</sup> *Inter Nos*, Supplement no. 22, 22 June 1928.



“It is a great consolation for me and my confreres every time we receive a letter from the Carmel. It seems that the Lord has kept these moments for us to pour into our souls all the sentiments of ardour and courage that our good angels at the Carmel obtain for us through their prayers and sacrifices.

“Thank you for this charity, my good Mother; and thank the Sisters for it too.

“At the thought of your sacrifices which are hidden and perhaps ordinary in substance but sublime and of immense value for the ardour of charity with which you offer them to God, we too would like to imitate you with an unbeaten effort in doing good, winning souls, preparing some merit to share with our sisters who are so generous with us.

“As recompense for your charity, I can offer you my keenest desire which I offer to Jesus every day: your sanctification. My desire is that you all become saints like Saint Teresa of Lisieux, like Saint Mary Magdalene, like your great Mother Saint Teresa.

“I do not know how much our prayers and our paltry efforts are worth: but what I can assure you is that they are faithfully and unreservedly deposited daily in the common bank in heaven, and are available to the good Sisters at the Carmel.

“Here in our Mission, the Lord, moved by the prayers and sacrifices of so many generous souls, seems to be preparing days which are a bit more serene. At the moment we are reasonably tranquil; and although the people have not yet recovered from the fear wrought by the communist hordes, nevertheless we are beginning to be able to approach them.”<sup>29</sup>

“I would like to recommend to you in a special way, Reverend Mother, and to all the Sisters, indigenous vocations, both for the priesthood and for religious life, men and women.

“With all my heart I bless you and all the Sisters.”<sup>30</sup>

### **To do something more for the Lord**

The bishop also gave more reassuring news in a letter written to Fr Rinaldi the day before, on 14 May 1928:

“Things here are going relatively calmly and since Christmas we have enjoyed a period of reasonable tranquillity. I say reasonable, because two of our districts, Nam-yung and Yan-fa, are still under Communist influence and have to suffer somewhat.”<sup>31</sup>

Two months later, on 16 July 1928, the feast of Our Lady of Carmel, the bishop’s thoughts went spontaneously to the Carmel in Florence, united spiritually with them in prayer.

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29 To understand the bishop’s claim we need to remember that he had written in the Annual Report on 1 October 1925: “At the moment we are isolated and those who were and still are most affectionate toward us hardly dare to come near us in public.” (see earlier and the note to it); and also what he wrote to Fr Braga: “With the establishment of Communism ... so as not to compromise themselves ... many friends and acquaintances refuse to greet us.”

30 *Lettere al Carmelo di Firenze*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

31 *Lettere al Carmelo di Firenze*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers., *Letters to Fr Philip Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers. In July 1927 there was the split between Chiang Kai Shek and the Communists. In Kwang-tung the reaction of the Nationalists was violent in the early months of 1928. When the Nationalists prevailed there was greater calm: properties were given back to their owners, Communist farmer associations were dissolved and many exiles were able to return home. But hotbeds of resistance remained in some towns and in April the following year the struggle resumed violently.

“Today I have felt more than ever the desire to place my poor heart in the hands of our heavenly Mother” he writes. “Might this not also be a triumph of your prayers?”

“The circumstance of today’s feast leaves no doubt.

“With this act, I feel growing in me more than ever the confidence to be able to do something more for the Lord, despite my immense weakness and wretchedness. It seems to me that our Most Blessed Mother will not allow my and your hopes to be disappointed. So continue to plague the hearts of Jesus and his most holy Mother for me.”<sup>32</sup>

### **God turns to the humble and with kind invitation bids them come to him**

We have often made reference to a famous passage from Saint Augustine on humility, because this virtue is one of the constant features of the life of Bishop Versiglia.

“Do you want to reach Christ, the height of happiness, peace and perpetual security?” asks the Saint. “It is good for you to go to him. But you need to see by what way. Humility is the first step. Begin by taking the first step and you will go high. You wish to be great, begin from the least. You are thinking to construct some mighty fabric in height; first think of the foundation of humility. And how great soever a mass of building one may wish and design to place above it, the greater the building is to be, the deeper does he dig his foundation.”<sup>33</sup>

No less significant is the passage from the *Imitation of Christ* (2,2): “To the humble He turns and upon them bestows great grace; He reveals His secrets to the humble, and with kind invitation bids them come to Him.”

We have said that those who lived with Bishop Versiglia saw, in his final years, both a process of humiliation and mortification of himself to a heroic degree, and a coming to God to the point of ‘life in Him’.

This growth, to the point where St Paul’s statement comes into play “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20), we find in a moving way in his correspondence over the last two years of his life with the Carmel in Florence and with Fr Rinaldi, whom the bishop considered to be his tender father.

### **The most lowly and needy among the missionaries wants to become a saint**

In a letter to the Mother and Sisters at the Carmel, on 15 October 1928, he writes:

“I accept, then, with immense pleasure the sweet task of offering you to the heavenly Bridegroom every morning as a host to be consumed in his love. How happy I feel at this task! Having nothing to offer the heart of Jesus when I sacrifice him on the altar, I can thus offer him daily one and perhaps even more victims who generously offer themselves to him ...

“I will finish by asking for a favour. I confess that the letter from you, Reverend Mother caused me difficulty on several points. You consider me a saint, and when writing use expressions which

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<sup>32</sup> *Lettere al Carmelo di Firenze*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>33</sup> *Sermo LXIX: De verbis Evang. Matthaei* Chap. 11, 28–29, *Venite ad me omnes qui laboratis et onerati estis* etc.; ML, vol. 38, col. 441.

betray this thought. No, no, Reverend Mother: know that you are dealing with the lowliest and most needy among the missionaries. and this is why you must consider him as being entrusted to your care and the care of your community so that all together you can help him to fulfil his duties with the least harm possible.

“The desire to be a saint, yes, I do have that! and perhaps, and even with perhaps, this too is the result of your prayers. But I am far from being one.

“I feel the duty to say this so you will not be disappointed and do not hope for too much from my prayers.

“Nevertheless, onward with the Lord, doing what we can. I bless you with all my heart.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The 13th General Chapter and Beatification of Don Bosco. Sacrifice and renunciation**

In November 1928, the bishop received the news that the next General Chapter 13 would be held in Turin after May 1929.

In February 1929, when the date was decided on, came the news of the coming Beatification of Don Bosco and a warm invitation to be part of both events.

The bishop replied on 25 February 1929, exactly a year before his glorious end.

“I bless the Lord that the General Chapter can be celebrated this year and that Don Bosco’s cause has now come home.

“I have received the letter of invitation. The Lord knows that I would not just like to come but to fly there. I have weighed up the pros and cons, and in the Lord it seems that I must conclude by making a sacrifice and renunciation regard my coming ... There are some real needs in the Mission, not the least of them being the tranquillity of various confreres who would not take my absence well. So I ask you to excuse me and to attribute my absence solely to the desire that the Mission and the confreres are okay as far as is possible ... As for arrangements regarding the Mission, I am very much convinced that the Superiors have all the good will ... Be assured that they will find me ready to help them in all their deliberations.”<sup>35</sup>

A telegram from Fr Rinaldi renewed the invitation; and the bishop replied on 30 March 1929:

“I have received your telegram. Thank you so much for your concern and the desire to have me by your side in these circumstances so dear to our heart. I consider this to be another sign of your fatherly affection and assure you that I was already prepared to go over all the considerations set out in my previous letter, to fly there and embrace you once more. You will have heard that things in China are once again becoming confused. After these recent events I have felt I am lacking in courage.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Our Mission has passed the test of fire**

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34 *Lettere al Carmelo di Firenze*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

35 *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal 9, 3, Vers.

36 *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal 9, 3, Vers.

The bishop's sad predictions came true; and it was so lucky that he was there to support his sons at the time of tribulation.

On 18 May 1929, the vigil of Pentecost, the bishop had the joy of conferring the priesthood on Fr Callisto Caravario who would be his companion in martyrdom. He had arrived from Timor a month earlier.<sup>37</sup>

But this joy was disturbed by the events of the war that shook up the entire region.

He himself spoke about it in a lengthy letter to Fr Rinaldi, on 19 June 1929.

“Who knows how great was the joy and consolation felt by your beloved self, all the Superiors and all the confreres gathered together over this first fortnight of June!<sup>38</sup>

“Instead, for your sons in China, this same fortnight was a time of anxiety and indescribable nightmares. Our poor Mission has passed the test of fire. The Lord has by now seen that it is capable of putting up with trials, even the toughest of them. However, may He always be blessed, so that everything may contribute to showing not only his goodness, but also the powerful intercession of our Blessed.

“Here are things in brief. The civil war which broke out toward the end of April, obliged the Government in Canton to concentrate all its troops on the river to the West, the Lin-chow; hence the territory of our Mission around the river to the North, that is, the districts of Yan-fa and Lok-chong, and the river to the North-East, the district of Nam-yung, remained literally unprotected by any military force. The Canton-Shiu-chow railway line was interrupted, and we spent more than twenty days with out any communications.

“This situation gave a golden opportunity to evil-doers of every kind. Groups of pirates, Communists, Bolsheviks reorganised themselves. This latter group especially, with a precise program of war against the Catholic Church, European Imperialism, and the wealthy. Every day villages and towns were attacked, robbed of everything, burnt and the population massacred.

“Also a number of our Christian communities, especially in the district of Yan-fa, were at serious risk and we were very apprehensive about them for a number of days; but they were always saved by special protection of our Blessed to whom we recommended them.”

### **Fr Dalmasso captured by the Bolsheviks**

“The one who had to suffer for everyone and who was, so to speak, chosen by the Lord to confer the stamp of maturity on our Mission, was our beloved confrere Fr Dalmasso.

“Surprised deceptively by a band of Communist Bolsheviks while he was accompanying groups of our pupils to the school in Nam-yung, where on 1 June they were celebrating the laying of the body of Sun Yat Sen in the Mausoleum in Nankin, he was captured by a patrol of Bolshevik soldiers and taken prisoner in Kiang-si with Bolshevik troops.<sup>39</sup>

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37 We will dedicate the following chapter to him.

38 On Sunday 2 June 1929 in Rome, the Holy Father Pius XI had proclaimed Don Bosco Blessed; the following Sunday, 9 June in Turin, the body of the new Blessed was moved from Valsalice to the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, followed by three days of celebrations at Valdocco.

39 On 1 June 1929 the body of Dr Sun Yat Sen, founder of the Chinese Republic, was brought from the Kuomintang headquarters in Nanchin to the Purple Hill outside the city where a large mausoleum had been prepared. Present were President Chiang Kai Schek,

“The suffering and mistreatment they inflicted on him over twelve long days are indescribable. Imagine our consternation! We put in place all the measures possible and imaginable to save our confrere. Some of our confreres exposed themselves to grave risks. The Christians of our Mission, the good Vincentian fathers in Kiang-si,<sup>40</sup> the territory Fr Dalmasso had been taken to, and the Christians of their Mission left nothing untouched.

“Not to speak of the consular authorities and those of the town: each one did his best and would certainly have contributed with his zeal and charity in the Lord’s account; but we recognise that the freeing of our confrere is a grace from the Lord, through the intercession of our Blessed, to whom we addressed endless supplications and novenas. His capture took place right on the vigil of the Beatification; and we could not doubt that he would take an interest in it.

“In fact, on 13 June, at three in the afternoon, the commander of the Bolshevik troops had the prisoner brought before him, and after making one last try to get him to Communism even suggesting to make him a *Tong Chong*, or head of a thousand of the five thousand making up the regiment, and seeing our confrere’s decision that he did not want to take even a single step toward following them in their retreat, he had his bonds loosened, declared he was free and gave him two dollars for his trip home.

“He is back among us once more and although he suffered a lot, he is by now almost back to where he was. Thank the Lord and Blessed Don Bosco. Now we are preparing a huge celebration in Shiu-chow in honour of our Father. We had already been planning for it. But after this special favour we will try to make it even more solemn. All the confreres of the Mission will take part, all the teachers, male and female, catechists, with representations from boys and girls schools from all the Christian areas. We hope that this celebration will serve not only to glorify our Blessed Don Bosco even more, but will also open a new era of work, strength, effort in this dear Mission.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Trials are an indication of maturity**

On 11 June, the bishop wrote a letter to Fr Dalmasso, preparing several copies which he sent by different means in the hope that one would reach him.

“My dear Fr Dalmasso, the Lord must have very special plans in allowing you and us to go through such serious tribulations ... and while we do not know what they are we bow before the divine will and adore him in trust and gratitude.

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representatives of 18 foreign countries and the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Celso Costantini. The whole country, celebrating, was united with them in spirit (Cf. C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, vol. II, Rome 1946, pp. 105-109). In the first five months of 1929, there had been violence and bloody vendettas carried out in Nam-yung between Nationalists and Communists, with hundreds dead. In April and May, a mysterious band of Communists had sown terror in the countryside around Nam-yung: entire families were slaughtered, towns burned down, fields destroyed. On 1 June 1929, Nam-yung was occupied by deception: two hundred Communist soldiers camouflaged as Nationalists succeeded in entering the city. There they sowed terror with their weapons, while the majority of the regiment of 2,500 men entered the city and took it over. There was destruction, places set fire, and killings. Fr Dalmasso was taken, tied up, through the streets, mocked at a public rally in the square then dragged away as a prisoner of the troops. After they had plundered the city they returned to the mountains in Kiang-si and from there went to Hu-nan, a Communist stronghold, set up there by Mao Tse Tung. The vice Mandarin of Nam-yung and deputy head of the police, also prisoners with Fr Dalmasso, were decapitated with savage joy (*Inter Nos*, Supplement, special edition, s.d.).

40 Bishop Dumond, Vicar Apostolic of Kan-chow and his Coadjutor, Bishop J. O’Shea, who had taken part in the episcopal consecration of Bishop Versiglia in April 1928.

41 *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

The confreres and pupils from all our institutes and Christians from every district are multiplying their prayers and novenas, especially to our Blessed Don Bosco ... Would he allow us to be disappointed?.”

In these opening lines, as in the letter to Fr Rinaldi, we sense the spirit of faith of a man of God who sees a gift from the Lord and an indication of the maturity of the community of faithful in major trials.

### **The envy of a saint**

The bishop speaks about all the means employed to gain Fr Dalmasso’s freedom and then concludes:

“Courage, dear Fr Dalmasso! None of us yet have the halo of the true apostle, the chains and bonds of Christ: the Lord has chosen you, and I, prostrate in spirit at your feet, kiss your bonds. If it could be given to me to suffer this, perhaps my heart would have at least some consolation.

“All the confreres, with deepest sympathy but with immense sorrow at the same time, share in your suffering and ask the Lord daily to even increase their own moral suffering but to lighten your own, comfort you and restore you as soon as possible to our affection.

“So courage, lift your heart! Sorrow and discouragement you will feel for sure, because our nature is always weak, but this will not diminish your halo in the least. Remember the words of St Paul: “ From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Cf. Gal 6:17).

“You can say this!

“I bless you with all my heart. You also receive the affectionate embrace of all the confreres who are near you in spirit.”<sup>42</sup>

In these lines we sense the affection of a father and the holy envy of bearing witness to Christ, as he looks, filled with veneration, at his companion who has gone before him in bearing supreme witness.

“While he was suffering immensely and fearful for the fate of his confrere,” says someone who was close to him over those days “at the same time he regretted that it was not he who had been touched by this fate so that it could be an opportunity to suffer for his God.”<sup>43</sup>

### **The Feast of Blessed Don Bosco at Shiu-chow**

The grand feast in honour of Blessed Don Bosco which the bishop mentions at the end of his letter to Fr Rinaldi on 19 June, was celebrated at Shiu-chow on Sunday 30 June and was described by Fr Caravario in *Inter Nos*.

It was preceded by a triduum, encouraged by the fatherly word of Bishop Versiglia. On the eve of the feast they held the solemn closing of the school year, and the city’s Mandarin took part,

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42 *Boll. Sal.* June 1930, p. 179.

43 Testimony of Sr Elena Bottini, *Summ.* p. 303.

giving ten pupils from Don Bosco their teacher's certificate and another five recognition that they had completed their professional practical training.

More than two hundred Christians from all the districts took part in the festivities. A good group of them came a hundred kilometres on foot, others by boat, and others again along the new vehicle road linking Lok-chong and Shiu-chow.

The solemn Pontifical drew particular admiration, especially from pilgrims who had come from towns in the districts.

In the evening at the academy on honour of the newly beatified, one number in particular was applauded. A small group of blind girls and another group of children from the shelter portrayed a kind of ballet with singing and musical accompaniment. The blind children, unconcerned about the large number of the public present whom they could not see, carried out their part to perfection, while the others, much impressed by it all, made a few mistakes.

In closing the academy, Bishop Versiglia took advantage of this episode to address a special word to the Salesian confreres and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, inviting them to be faithful to Don Bosco, following his teachings with "eyes closed" in order to work effectively for the good of souls.<sup>44</sup>

### **Deep humility, detachment from the earth and peace from being absorbed in God**

One religious Sister, after hearing a number of his conferences in the final days of the bishop's life, ended up saying: "The bishop is ready for heaven: he will not remain with us much longer.

"There is nothing of the human being in his speech any more; we only hear the pilgrim tired of this earth and thirsting for Paradise."<sup>45</sup>

Deep humility, detachment from earth, peace of the soul now absorbed in God. This is the atmosphere of his final letters to Fr Rinaldi and the Carmel.<sup>46</sup>

Here is his letter to Fr Rinaldi.

*Shiu-chow, 25 September 1929*

"Very Reverend and beloved Father, I have received your letter of 11 August. I thank you because your word is balm for my heart. I would like to hear from you frequently; but I know that my past manner were perhaps the reason for why they are so rare and I feel so sorry for that.

"I do not know what I would do if I were to begin again from the beginning with the simplicity, the intimate confidence I had in the Superiors up to the time I last left Turin, at that was then upset by so many misunderstandings ...

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44 *Inter Nos*, Anno IX, no. 1, 1 September 1929, pp. 4–7; *Boll. Sal.* January 1930, pp. 18–19; *Memoirs of Fr Pietro Pomati*, Arch. Sal. 9, 5, Vers.

45 Referred to by Fr Rinaldi in the *Acts of the Superior Chapter*, Anno XI, no. 53, 24 April 1930, p. 862.

46 The letter to Fr Rinaldi we mentioned earlier, mentions "approaches in the past" that were perhaps the reason for the less frequent correspondence with the Superiors; and "misunderstandings", after his last departure from Turin (January 1923). These are thoughts dictated by his deep humility. His "approaches in the past" were always the most respectful and devout, and "misunderstandings" never existed because he was always very obedient both to the Holy See and the Salesian Superiors and on the other side there was a saint, Fr Rinaldi.

“If it is still possible to re-establish all this, let your fatherliness tell me so, or let some other of the Superiors tell me what I must do; they can tell me what they want, point out the way I must follow to pair the good of the Congregation with what is good for the Mission. They can tell me, tell me directly without using any indirect means so their voice comes to me as genuine.

“I do not intend to reserved any rights, not on personnel, houses or anything else except that which is absolutely inalienable. Therefore whatever may be the Superiors’ desires,, they just need to say the word and I will be compliant in everything so that the Mission may develop and souls be saved.

“My opinions, my persuasions, perhaps too keenly expressed sometimes, have possibly caused the Superiors some difficulties? ... Well then, I will try to be more moderate; and if needs be I will bury them deep in my heart and never let them escape.

“I would like to say something more: I would like the Superiors to be convinced, as I am convinced by now, that this Mission needs an Ecclesiastical Superior that has greater virtue and better criteria than I have; and who has more fresh energy to give new movement to everything. Out of love for Jesus Christ, love for souls redeemed by his precious Blood, I ask the Superiors to point out and open the way for me so this can be carried out. I assure you that once I am returned to the life of a simple confrere I will not give any trouble to the Superiors, insofar as that depends on me, but will place myself in their hands like the least of my confreres. What I want is that the Mission ( and by this I mean the souls and confreres working for them) does not have to suffer.

“I beg you, beloved Father, to not take these words as a simple letting off of steam. No, I mean to give each word the strictest and most positive meaning. Pass on, if you wish, to the other Superiors this readiness of my soul. Indeed I will keep a copy of these words of mine, almost as if to oblige myself to not change even a word.

“Hoping for warm understanding, as is appropriate for a son to his fathers, and asking you for your blessing, with all my affection and the most filial reverence I am obligingly yours, Luigi Versiglia.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Complete self-sacrifice for the salvation of souls**

“The Superiors will find me compliant in everything so that the Mission may develop and souls be saved!”<sup>48</sup>

This is the key to the significance of the letter and a summary of an entire life: complete self-sacrifice for the salvation of souls.

On Sunday 11 March 1888, in the Church of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, during the farewell ceremony for missionaries leaving with Fr Cassini, the sight of a young missionary leaving everything to go and save souls, had meant that the young student in his third year of high school, Versiglia, would sacrifice his earlier ideal to dedicate himself to the salvation of souls. From that

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<sup>47</sup> *Lettere a Don Filippo Rinaldi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>48</sup> Everyone who lived with him testifies to his “surrender” to superiors, be they ecclesiastical or religious: Fr Carlo Braga (*Summ.* pp. 172-173), his Provicar Fr Giovanni Guarona (*Summ.* p. 185), Fr Bartolomeo Fochesato (*Summ.* pp. 132, 136-137), Fr Giuseppe Cucchiara (*Summ.* p. 287), Bishop Michele Arduino (*Summ.* pp. 320-321 ), Fr Francesco Ruffini (*Summ.* pp. 428-429), Fr Antonio De Amicis (*Summ.* pp. 331-332), Sr Elena Bottini (*Summ.* pp. 303-304), Sr Antonia Quaglino (*Summ.* pp. 313-314).



day on his life had been completely dedicated, even before acquiring the virtues needed to become a good missionary and then to save souls.

With complete renunciation of himself for the good of the Mission, the sacrifice had reached its peak. Exactly five months later, on 25 February 1930, this renunciation of his own life would consume the holocaust, and blood of the first Salesian martyr would go into the soil like a fertile seed on Chinese land.

This letter also does not lack the dominant note of Bishop Versiglia's personality, indeed it reaches its highest tone: humility. One of his missionaries judges it to be his "characterising" virtue.<sup>49</sup> "The Mission needs an Ecclesiastical Superior of greater virtue and better criteria than I have," he writes.

Thus did he tell everyone the important objectives of the great work which God used this humble instrument to achieve. And God exalted him, bringing him into the glorious band of his martyrs.

### **The joy of being with the Church and with the Congregation**

We do not have Fr Rinaldi's reply to this letter, because the documents in the Archbishop's archives in Shiu-chow fell into the hands of the Communists who took over the Mission in 1951.<sup>50</sup> It certainly had to have had the warmth of another saint's soul. One missionary who was with the bishop when this letter arrived tells us: "One cannot describe the joy he felt when he received the letter from the Rector Major Fr Rinaldi, who assured him of the complete satisfaction of the Superiors regarding his work and his apostolic efforts, and of the complete and absolute trust that the Superiors and the Salesian Society unanimously had in him. They encouraged him to persevere in his position and his efforts for the greater glory of God and the good of souls and the Mission."<sup>51</sup>

Above and beyond all human things, two saints understood one another in God.

### **On the peaks of souls who dwell in God**

The final letter to the Carmel touches the peak of the heights in which the souls who "dwell in God" breathe.

"Reverend, and, in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, beloved Mother,

Only yesterday did your much-awaited letter arrive, all redolent of the perfume of charity. May the Lord be blessed for this! ... Do not doubt, my good Mother, I know that our Sisters at the Carmel have to attend to such an important and sublime work that it does not allow for frequent correspondence by letter, no matter how holy that also is.

"Being in constant and intimate relationship with God is of immensely greater value for both of us, you and us, than being in direct correspondence between us poor creatures. So I have no right to complain for any tardiness in writing. Instead the only thing I dare ask is that each time that you, my Mother in Jesus, and the beloved sisters present yourselves before the Divine Majesty, you

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49 Fr Giuseppe Cucchiara, *Summ.* p. 287.

50 *Summ.* p. 325.

51 Testimony of Fr Francesco Ruffini, *Summ.* p. 429.

make the effort to drag behind you the hearts of your missionary brothers at work amid ice and dissipation.

“Indeed, since I have mentioned our exchanges by letter, does it not seem that we could go one step further? I am not talking of suppressing them; no, this would be an heroic act which only souls completely detached from the world, like our Blessed Redi, could do.

“So what would the step be? Does it not seem to you that too often we have spoken of ourselves and that we have spent time entertaining ourselves with panegyrics about each other? Well then, let us lift our hearts higher, forget ourselves and speak more of God, of how to serve him better, console him more, of the need and the way to win souls over to him. You, Sisters, can more easily speak to us of the refined nature of love for Jesus, and we perhaps can speak to you about the wretchedness of so many souls who live ‘far from God’ and of the need to lead them to him; we will feel ourselves lifted up to love of God, and you will feel more urged to be zealous. What do you think?”<sup>52</sup>

The letter is of 18 January 1930, exactly 38 days before his martyrdom.

It helps us penetrate the intimacy of a soul already walking on the earth on tiptoe and dwelling only in God and for his glory.

“Being in constant and intimate relationship with God” he says “is of immensely greater value for both of us, you and us, than being in direct correspondence between us poor creatures.”

So, suppress the correspondence?

No, keep it going to speak only of God.

This is the sublime conclusion of a life spent for the coming of the kingdom of God in this world and wise about “life in God” in heaven.

A Salesian missionary who was ordained by Bishop Versiglia in Shiu-chow on 5 February while shots from Communist groups were riddling the walls of the church, wrote of him when celebrating the centenary of the saintly bishop’s birth in Tortona Diocese in 1973: “Bishop Versiglia was a true giant of holiness, charity and zeal.”<sup>53</sup>

This is the intimate persuasion of those who met and knew the first Salesian Martyr in China.

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<sup>52</sup> *Lettere al Carmelo di Firenze*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

<sup>53</sup> Fr Pietro Battezzati, in *Luigi Versiglia Vescovo e Martire*, a single publication by the Diocese of Tortona, Tortona 1973, pp. 36-37.

**Cuornè, a busy town in the Canavese**

Callisto Caravario, son of Pietro and Rosa Morgando, was born at Cuornè, a busy town in the Canavese, on 8 June 1903. He learned love of God, work, a recollected life in the intimacy of the family from his working-class family.

“When he was just a few years old” his sister tells us, “he was already showing a serious character, a pronounced tendency to recollection at home, and great reverence for his mother.”<sup>1</sup>

**Two poles of attraction: the Lord and his mother**

He preferred his mother’s company to the noisy amusements of his brother, sister and others his own age.

“He was just four years old,” his sister continues “when one day mother stayed in bed ill. His brother and sister did not give up their usual games outside. Little Callisto stayed there all day with his mother. He had jumped up onto the large matrimonial bed, and was curled up next to his mother who was asleep. When she awoke she felt two little lips touching her hand with a kiss and her child’s little voice re-assuring her:

‘Sleep well, mother, I am here watching over you!’<sup>2</sup>

“Going to church was his passion” his sister continues once more “and to take him off to pray was the best gift.” “Once, on a Sunday, I gave in to his insistence and went out to go with him. But when we got to the square, I met a friend and stopped to chat for a long time. The child disappeared. He had gone back home. When I got back there he told me off fiercely: “I came back to mother because you didn’t take me to church.”<sup>3</sup>

These were his two poles of attraction: The Lord and his mother. He had certainly absorbed these feelings from his father and mother, who were both very devout Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> *Memorie della sorella Vica* (Memoirs of his sister Vica), p. 1, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3–4.

## **In Turin. A special child for his intelligence and goodness**

He was five when the family moved to Turin, to Borgo San Salvario, a central area between the Valentino and Porta Nuova.

When he was six, Callisto began to attend the nearby Raineri school in Corso Valentino (now Marconi), where he completed his first three classes at primary school.

The teachers saw in him a special child for his intelligence and goodness. One of them wanted to tell his mother about this and congratulated her for such a child.

One of the Sisters at San Salvario did the same. She had a catechism class at St Peter's Church. She wanted to get to know his mother and advised her to pay special attention to her child who would become a good priest in time.<sup>4</sup>

## **Retreat before first Communion**

He showed a piety and common sense beyond his seven years of age. When the day of his first Communion was approaching and he heard that two school mates were preparing themselves with a three day retreat with the Sisters of the Cenacle, in Corso Vittorio, he asked his mother if he could go with them.

“He made his first Communion with angelic fervour,” his sister tells us.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Oratory, a second home**

Given this interior atmosphere of love for God, we can well understand how happy little Callisto was when he discovered that not far from his home there was a Salesian oratory where children played, prayed and learned their catechism. The oratory became his second home. He did not go there just to amuse himself. Indeed, games were not his forte. He enjoyed helping the Salesian catechists to keep the chapel, theatre, hall clean and tidy, sweeping, watering down the dusty courtyard in summer ...

It was while doing these tasks that he met Fr Garelli, when one afternoon in October 1913, the latter made an unannounced visit to St Joseph's Oratory in Via Saluzzo. He had been given the job as the Rector there.

“The first one I met” he writes “was little Callisto, who at that moment was helping a Salesian Brother to tidy up where the rougher kids had made a mess. I can still see his serene face, big but kindly eyes, his candour, and he was not at all awkward in welcoming the new Rector, hands dirty from the work he was doing ....”<sup>6</sup>

The reason for the child's ease was that by now he felt he was an “old hand” at the oratory and felt at home there. He began attending as soon as his mother allowed him to and had already made a great friend, cleric Braga, who was teaching primary classes at the St John the Evangelist College, and on Sundays came to work at the St Joseph's Oratory.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 4–5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> Fr Sante Garelli, *Vita di Don Callisto Caravario*, manuscript p. 6.

## **With the Salesians at St John the Evangelist**

Meanwhile at the Raineri school, we do not know why, Callisto was not feeling so good about things, and because he was a sensitive child was also not doing so well. Thought was given to him changing schools. His mother was happy to enrol him as a day student at the St John the Evangelist primary section of the college, where he had cleric Braga as his teacher for two years. It seemed to be a dream for Callisto that he could spend all day and every day with the good Salesians who were working at the St Joseph's Oratory, and to have its young catechist as his teacher.

“I got to know Callisto for the first time at the St Joseph's Oratory in Via Saluzzo in Turin,” Fr Braga writes “and since I was very enthusiastic about getting the boys to run and jump and enjoy themselves, at first he did not win my sympathy, and perhaps I showed that, because he would rarely come out an play. But when I looked into his two big eyes which were so innocent, pure and good, I began to have great respect for him, even more so when I realised that he was not wasting time but would go up to boys who had just arrived or would engage with other boys who amused themselves in a quieter way.”<sup>7</sup>

## **A young apostle among his schoolmates**

“He was a young apostle among his schoolmates, inviting the rougher boys not to use bad language and to moderate their rough and impetuous behaviour” Fr Braga continues. He was very faithful to going to Communion, serving in the church and helping the cleric catechists and the Rector.

“As a student at the St John the Evangelist College he could only be praised, both for the impeccable cleanliness of his clothes and person and for his commitment to his studies and making progress in virtue. He would look at me with those good eyes of his, and in such a happy, recollected, attentive way, with such warmth, that he lifted my spirits at times when life in school was not so easy. Over both the years he was with me, I was happy to award him first place for study and conduct.

“He was good to his schoolmates, not just in word and advice when they came to the school or in recreation, but also when he acted as a guardian angel by accompanying them on their way home.

“His mother told me that to help one of his friends and convince him to receive his First Communion as soon as possible, he went a good two hours with him, and then had to come all the way back on his own.

“His schoolmates always had great respect and reverence for him, so much so that one of them confided the secrets of his conscience in him, not only in the easy years of childhood but also during the stormy days of adolescence and the pitfalls of older youth.

“His mother assured me constantly that Callisto had never caused her any trouble; he was always very obedient, hard-working, studious and devout.

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<sup>7</sup> *Summ.* p. 149.

“When he saw her sad and downcast, Callisto would come to her, take her by the hands and say: ‘Mother, courage, I will pray for you’ and he would keep his promise and really pray for her. There was no childish greed about him: you could leave fruit or food around and be sure that Callisto had not touched it.”<sup>8</sup>

### **I asked for the grace to become a priest**

He joined the St Aloysius sodality at the Oratory, which was for the better and more devout boys. He never failed to go to confession and communion each Sunday.

“One Sunday,” Fr Eusebio Battezzati, who was a cleric and catechist at the oratory at the time, tells us “I was watching him during the elevation, his head straight, eyes fixed on the sacred host and lips forming words. Since we were very close, I found a moment to ask him:

‘What were you saying this morning during the elevation?’

“At first he tried to dodge the question, then with great candour he confided:

‘I was asking Jesus for the grace to imitate St Aloysius in his purity and become a priest.’”<sup>9</sup>

### **I asked the Lord to make me ill**

“I had to be away from the Oratory for several Sundays, because I was sick” Fr Battezzati goes on to say. “When I returned, Callisto greeted me with immense joy. However I noted signs of tiredness in his demeanour. I saw him go strangely white when he was in church... I went up to him, inviting him to remain seated, and then to go out and take something. But he avoided this resolutely, saying he did not want to miss Communion, which he went up for in a most edifying way. When Mass was over, I insisted he come and take some coffee and food. He just said he had a headache and did not want to take anything. But I saw he was hiding something. I insisted gently, and this time he opened up his beautiful soul:

‘You did not come to the Oratory for some Sundays and our St Aloysius sodality was not going well’ he told me. The Rector had asked us to pray so that you would return soon. I asked the Lord to make me ill and you to recover ...’

“And tears sprang to his eyes ...

“By the afternoon I saw him all happy again.

‘And the headache?’ I asked him with a smile on my face.

‘Oh, I hope there will be no further need for that’ he replied, also smiling.’”<sup>10</sup>

### **It is better for me to wait than for you to be waiting**

He very quickly learned to serve Mass and did it gladly and with devotion.

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<sup>8</sup> *Summ.* pp. 149–150.

<sup>9</sup> Fr Sante Garelli, *Vita di Don Callisto Caravario*, manuscript p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> S. Garelli, *Op. cit.* pp. 9–11.

The Rector of the Oratory, Fr Garelli, used to go to St Joseph's on Monday morning to celebrate Mass there and then consume the sacred species; he went there very early because he also had to teach at Valsalice. Little Callisto offered to serve his Mass. He wanted his mother to wake him at four in the morning. He arrived at the Oratory much earlier than needed and waited patiently at the door in the cold, fog and snow.

"Why do you come so early?" Fr Garelli asked.

"It is better for me to wait rather than for you to be waiting" he replied cheerfully; and he continued to arrive very early.

"I understood," Fr Garelli continued "that it was not only a matter of being punctual, but that he also wanted to suffer something to prepared himself for Communion, which he also received very devoutly."<sup>11</sup>

### **You will see that he becomes something great!**

I said earlier that the good Sister who taught him catechism at St Peter's church had foretold that he would become a good priest. He gave clear signs of his inclination toward the priesthood from his earliest years. His early amusements were to imitate the gestures of the priest who said Mass. He did this very seriously and tried not to be seen. But his sister, a little devilishly, had surprised him at it a number of times and would mock him for what she called "his fads". On one occasion the child was offended and said to her in all seriousness:

"Don't laugh. You will see what I will be when I grow up!"<sup>12</sup>

When his mother asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up he constantly said: "I will become a priest."<sup>13</sup>

At both the St Joseph's Oratory and St John's College he showed much more serious proof that he had a strong vocation to the priesthood.

### **Student at the Salesian Oratory at Valdocco**

"The St Joseph's Oratory was very poor," Fr Garelli writes. "When I went there as the Rector, there were just five lire left in the safe; and the Brother who was in charge of the Oratory spent that to buy a bottle of vermouth to welcome me and the few others there ... Given the many expenses and very little income, this was how our finances continued to be. For Callisto to follow his vocation, he needed to be accepted as a boarder at the Oratory in Valdocco. The family were unable to pay the fees. I took up the task of finding benefactors who would help me with this. In October 1914 Callisto was able to commence his first year of high school at the Salesian Oratory in Valdocco."<sup>14</sup>

"I took young Callisto Caravario in his first year of high school at the Valdocco Oratory in the 1914-15 school year" writes his teacher, Fr Pietro Lignetti. "I remember that he immediately made

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11 S. Garelli, *Op. cit.* pp. 13-14.

12 *Memorie della sorella Vica*, pp. 7-8.

13 *Summ.* p. 152.

14 S. Garelli, *Op. cit.* pp. 17-18.

a good impression on me for his composure, his attention in class, and especially for his piety. He regularly made a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and went to Holy Communion.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Friendship that did not diminish**

The good impression Callisto left behind at the St Joseph’s Oratory was shown by the attachment his fellow members of the St Aloysius sodality showed in his regard.

“The very best gift I could give them at the beginning of the new year at the oratory, 1914–15,” writes Fr Garelli “Was to go with them to Valdocco to look up their friend Caravario again. They went to Communion at the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians, visited Don Bosco’s rooms, always accompanied by their former fellow member Callisto, who by then no longer appeared to be the timid little boy who stood back to give precedence to others, but he was like an older brother guiding them, instructing, advising. And his young friends were full of admiration and respect for him.”<sup>16</sup>

Naturally, during the holidays, when Callisto was not at home he was at St Joseph’s Oratory. “Here, he gave valuable help in teaching catechism and assisting the youngest boys,” Fr Garelli says.<sup>17</sup>

On weekdays when the Oratory was closed, Callisto loved to be with his mother, in direct contrast to his brother and sister who continued to like their noisy games outside.

“Go and get some fresh air” his mother told him sometimes.

“Mother, don’t you want me with you?” he would answer. “Let me stay here; I like being with you.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Always among the best in the class**

“After the first year of high school,” Fr Lignetti continues “I no longer had contact with him, but I continued to follow him up while he was in other secondary classes; his generosity, fervent piety, and his zeal meant that I had high hopes for him.”<sup>19</sup>

His behaviour was always the best, and his school results always saw him among the top students as we see from the final report each year, which consistently saw him with an average score of eight out of ten.<sup>20</sup>

“For two years I was a classmate of his at the Salesian Oratory in Valdocco” writes Fr Pietro Zerbino. I still have a vivid memory of his precocious seriousness which gave him an aura of respect and esteem among his companions and won the trust of the Superiors. I was convinced that he was among the best of the students and the most pious one in fourth year high school. He was a meek character, shied away from boisterousness, was very affectionate, and he had a smile and a good word for everyone especially the less diligent. What he liked most was to spend time with the

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15 *Memorie di Don Pietro Lignetti*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

16 S. Garelli, *Op. cit.* pp. 23-24.

17 S. Garelli, *Op. cit.* p. 25.

18 *Memorie della sorella Vica*, p. 11.

19 *Memorie di Don Pietro Lignetti*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

20 *School documents*, Arch. Sal. 9,1, Carav.



missionaries who frequently passed through the Oratory at Valdocco to visit the Major Superiors or would spend some time there. Especially Fr Maggiorino Borgatello, a veteran of the missions in Patagonia, who spent his final years at Valdocco. Callisto would spend entire recreations with him, nurturing his ardent zeal for the missions.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Salesian cleric. The zeal of an apostle**

At the end of fourth year high school, Callisto asked to enter the Salesian Congregation, and in August 1918, he began his novitiate at Foglizzo.

His novice master was the saintly soul, Fr Domenico Cànepa. Hundreds of Salesians formed to religious life by him remembered him with reverence and gratitude.

We report just one of the testimonies of Callisto’s fellow novices.

“He had asked me to tell him of any faults I found in him” one of them writes. “I recall and today still admire the humility, simplicity and kindness with which he accepted any observation. Characteristic of him was his zeal for the Missions. There was much talk about them often among us novices: he was the most enthusiastic and the one most determined to leave as soon as there was the possibility. He was meek, good and despite being very young he showed a maturity of thought, prudence in acting, a humility and piety that was uncommon.”<sup>22</sup>

On 19 September 1919 he took his religious vows and then attended fifth year high school and three classes as part of the classical matriculation in the studentate at Valsalice, Turin.

On Sundays, some of the clerics at Valsalice were involved in the various Salesian oratories around the city. Cleric Caravario wanted to go back to what he called “his oratory”, St Joseph’s in Via Saluzzo. This is where his Salesian vocation had flourished and where he had tasted the sweet early joys of intimacy with the Lord. But that oratory had been closed during the war, its rooms taken over for military use. The boys had been advised to attend the nearby St Aloysius Oratory in Via Ormea. Cleric Caravario was assigned to this one and carried out a valuable apostolate there.

Here is how one of his boys describes the first time he met Don Caravario [note: we will often use the Italian term ‘Don’ of Caravario. It was a common reference, even for clerics, at the time], a meeting that became “a friendship forever.”

“I was fourteen” he writes. “A friend told me that there was a Salesian oratory in Via Ormea. I went there with him on Sunday 30 May 1920. We were met at the door by a very young cleric, smiling and jovial, Don Caravario. He took us around the poor rooms of the oratory, presented us to various Salesians who were working there, and when it was time, invited us to take part in the Sunday Mass with other boys. I had the impression of being in a setting that was paradise. I came back every Sunday, made friends with many other boys and became very enthusiastic about life at the oratory. One day I was playing a lively ball game. Don Caravario stopped me; he drew me aside under the portico and asked me point blank:

‘Would you like to be a priest if this were the Lord’s will?’

“He said it with so much inner devotion that I was deeply struck by it.

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<sup>21</sup> *Memorie di Don Pietro Zerbino*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

<sup>22</sup> *Memorie di Don Antonio Villa*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

‘Yes’ I replied. And he sent me back to the game.

“From that day Don Caravario was my best friend and confidant. He followed me up with the love of a father and the youthful warmth of a brother. My family were openly hostile to me decision to become a priest. For years I felt very much alone. Don Caravario increased the attention he gave me. When he no longer came to St Aloysius I went to look for him at Valsalice, at St John’s College, and then at Valdocco: for me his conversation was light and comfort, and he was a model to imitate. He continued to follow me from China with uninterrupted correspondence, even when I was a soldier. After God’s grace I owe it to him that I am now a priest.”<sup>23</sup>

This was not the only boy the young cleric Caravario set on the path to the priesthood, or helped to live a more complete Christian life.

In 1920–21, the St Joseph’s Oratory was reopened, and Don Caravario returned there enthusiastically to pay a debt of gratitude, as he said, by dedicating himself to the boys as other Salesians had done once for him. Witness to his apostolic zeal is the very vivid memory of him at the Oratory.

“I followed him there as catechist at the St Joseph’s Oratory” writes Fr Zerbino. “I recall that on the Sunday evening when I went back to Valsalice, many of the boys asked me to greet Don Caravario. They never ceased regretting the loss of his presence and activity at their Oratory. If anyone’s behaviour left something to be desired, it was enough for me to say: “Should Don Caravario find out, would he be happy?’ And he would soon promise me he would do better. Sometimes I would say: ‘Don Caravario is waiting for you at Valsalice, because he would like to speak with you.’ I would then tell Don Callisto. Without fail the young man would come to me and then go away with resolutions to do better. Now, if I had to say what was the secret of the effectiveness of his work amongst the young, I would not hesitate to say that it was his intense inner life of prayer and self-offering to God which showed up outwardly in exceptional zeal, something I found to this degree in no other companion of his.’<sup>24</sup>

During the 1921–22 school year, given the scarcity of personnel, cleric Caravario was sent as assistant to St John the Evangelist’s College, even though he was still attending the final two years of high school at Valsalice as an external student.

Here too his wonderful gifts as an exemplary religious and educator stood out: deep sense of piety, gentleness of approach, love for his boys. How diligently he looked after the St Aloysius sodality which the youngest boys belonged to. He probably saw his own face in those innocent little faces, when he was in his primary school years and a member of the same sodality at St Joseph’s Oratory.

## **To be a missionary**

But his real aspiration was to be a missionary.

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<sup>23</sup> *Memorie di Don Giuseppe Canonica*, now (1974) parish priest in the Diocese of Albenga. Some letters from Fr Caravario addressed to him and some photos kept in the Salesian Central Archives.

<sup>24</sup> *Memorie di Don Pietro Zerbino*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

“He told me this one day in a friendly chat” writes Fr Alessio Barberis, the Rector at St John’s College. “And he did it so simply and decisively that it told me the idea had already fully matured in him after much inward consideration.”<sup>25</sup>

In April 1922, Bishop Versiglia came to Turin for the 12th General Chapter. A few clerics went to see him and expressed the desire to follow him to the Mission. Among them was cleric Caravario.

Naturally, the Superiors did not let him realise his desire immediately because this would have put an end to his studies. He returned to Valsalice for the 1922-23 school year where he did the third of his final years of secondary studies and matriculated in the classics course..

The following year, 1923–24, he was sent as assistant to the working boys at the Oratory at Valdocco, and was also looking after the Fr Michale Rua group for the older boys.

He was with the working boys for just over three months when a group of missionaries left Valdocco for China. Don Caravario gave them a brief letter for his former teacher Fr Braga, now a missionary at Shiu-chow. It was dated 21 November 1923: “I am sending you these few lines at the last moment,” he writes “but I don’t want the new missionaries to leave without bringing you my greetings. My dear Fr Braga, please prepare a little place for me.”<sup>26</sup>

### **A wonderful experience of Salesian pedagogy**

Regarding this year in Valdocco, his last in Italy, it is worth recording the balanced and serene judgement of one of his pupils in the tailoring section who then became a Salesian Brother.

“Don Callisto Caravario” he writes “was my assistant and teacher when I was in my fourth year of tailoring.

“As a teacher, Don Caravario was a model. He spoke clearly and precisely and made himself understood by everyone. I never saw him upset when someone did not understand the lesson. He listened patiently, made suggestions, then repeated the explanation until everyone understood it. What can I say about his way of assisting? I was a boy: I did not see the strict superior in him but an older brother who advised in kindly fashion. He had a constant warm smile and made his advice sound acceptable. During the hours of assistance in the workshop he would walk around the large hall with a book in hand. He took note of any misbehaviour by anyone. Then when it came to the weekly report on behaviour he would present us with precise details and succeeded in convincing and persuading us to improve our behaviour.”<sup>27</sup>

Another pupil has a vivid page to offer on this method of correction. “The custom was” he writes “to give marks for conduct that were read out publicly at the end of each week. The following Monday the pupils who had received a poor mark had to go and see the assistant who would offer an explanation in a kindly way for the mark and give some advice for improving things. I recall once that one of the boys near me, one of the older boys and a less disciplined one – he was eighteen years old and felt quite independent – had decided to be arrogant and demand satisfaction for the mark he had been given which, in his view, was unjustly severe. Don Caravario was assisting from a high chair that overlooked the whole workshop. The young fellow went up to him

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<sup>25</sup> *Memorie di Don Alessio Barberis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Vers.

<sup>26</sup> *Two letters to Fr Braga*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

<sup>27</sup> *Memorie di Luigi Prandi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

all sullen and proud. I was watching from where I stood. Don Caravario received him warmly and with a few facetious remarks to soften the young man's obviously haughty approach. When he saw that he was a bit more accessible he became serious. There was an exchange of comments which naturally I could not hear. Bit by bit I saw the young man nod his head in a sign of agreement. At the end Don Caravario put a kindly hand on his shoulder and sent him off with a very kind smile.

"I saw the young man return meekly to the place next to me, his eyes glistening with tears. I pretended not to have noticed anything. He quietly went back to work and at one moment, when he thought he was not being watched, he dried his tears with the back of his hand. I do not know what Don Caravario had said to him, but I can guess from what he told me on another occasion. When he spoke to us confidentially his words had a very special power of penetration: he reminded us of our mothers, our fathers, the sacrifices our dear ones were making for us, and his words had such warmth of affection and persuasion that even the most difficult boys would give in."<sup>28</sup>

The first pupil whose very balanced judgement of his assistant we referred to, finishes his account with a detail which points to the source of Don Callisto's effective words, that is, his intense interior life: "His demeanour in church" he writes "was edifying. When he came back from Communion he looked like an angel."<sup>29</sup>

On 14 September 1924, Don Caravario made his perpetual religious profession. His witnesses were his Rector at the St Joseph's Oratory, Fr Sante Garelli, and one of his high school teachers, Fr Magno Salvatico.<sup>30</sup>

### **The dream becomes a reality. Saying goodbye**

In 1924, the Salesians accepted the management of a large technical institute in Shanghai, and Fr Garelli, who had returned from Macao the previous year, was chosen to be the Rector.

Cleric Caravario, as soon as he found out, went immediately to his former Rector and begged him to press the Superiors to allow him permission to follow him to China. This time the dream became reality.

The respect he had gained in the brief time he was with the young working boys at Valdocco, was shown by the emotion of his young charges in the final days of his stay there.

St Joseph's Oratory, too, felt the pride of giving three missionaries: former Rector Fr Garelli and two oratorians, cleric Caravario and cleric Fontana, also a teacher at Valdocco in the students' section. They wanted all three to be at St Joseph's for the final Sunday they were to spend in Italy, on 5 October 1924.

In his diary, Don Caravario describes it as "a truly beautiful day." He talks about the many Communion of his companions, and about the gifts prepared for the three missionaries, then adds: "After Mass, my mother spoke with Fr Garelli. Poor mum, she had very little understanding of all the commotion. She entrusted me to him, asked him to be a father to me, saying that she was gladly leaving her son in Don Bosco's hands ... All my family were at the dinner: dad, mum, Andrea and

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<sup>28</sup> *Memorie di N. N.*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

<sup>29</sup> *Memorie di Luigi Prandi*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

<sup>30</sup> *Religious documents*, Arch. Sal. 9,1, Carav.

Vica.” He listed the gifts that each had prepared. His mother, some days earlier, had given him a considerable sum of money, the result of her savings.

“With all the affection and generosity I am capable of,” Callisto writes in his diary “I thank you Lord for having given me such a good mother.”<sup>31</sup>

Two pages in the diary follow in scribble, but overflowing with affection and faith. They were written by his mother Rosa. No doubt that Callisto viewed them with emotion each time he opened the diary.

### **His mother weeps ... Lord give me strength!**

They left from Turin station on Monday morning 7 October.

“The day of the victory at Lepanto, Mary’s victory,” Callisto notes in his diary.

“I encouraged my mother to have strength and boarded the train” he writes. “May the Lord bless you and reward you ... The train started moving ... handkerchiefs waving ... My mother is weeping ... Lord give me strength!

“And he, who was so sensitive, so delicate, was he not weeping?” Fr Garelli asked himself. He went with the group as far as Genoa and the ship. Certainly, he was also weeping, secretly. His tears were falling ...

“In the cry ‘Lord give me strength’ is the echo of a broken heart, yes, but supported by great faith and love of God, the same faith and love that would make him serene in the face of martyrdom.”<sup>32</sup>

The same evening, at 5.30 p.m., they sailed from Genoa on board a German ship, the Koblenz.

The group destined for Shanghai was led by Fr Antonio Martin.<sup>33</sup> Fr Garelli had returned to Turin for other matters. He would leave a month later, leading the second group, and would arrive in Shanghai on 16 January 1925. Travelling with the Shanghai group was also a group of prenovices heading for the novitiate at Ho-sai, in Shiu-chow.

### **As Italy begins to disappear ... Lord, I offer you my sacrifice**

Don Caravario notes in his diary on 9 October:

“At first I could see the outline of the Aeolian islands; then, little by little, we headed for the Messina Strait. What a beautiful, enchanting panorama! On one side arid Calabria and on the other side verdant Sicily, with all its little towns. Messina, laid out like an amphitheatre, stood out against a green background. Then far into the horizon was the high and majestic peak of Etna, its plume of smoke reaching up to the heavens. How one feels the greatness of God! A conversation arises on board with a passenger, one I also was part of. Lord, how much religious ignorance there is! How

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<sup>31</sup> *Diary of Fr Callisto Caravario*, handwritten, p.1, Arch. Sal. 9, 4, Carav.

<sup>32</sup> S. Garelli, *Op. cit.* pp. 39-40.

<sup>33</sup> Other than to Fr Martin, clerics Callisto Caravario and Ernesto Fontana, Brother Ottavio Fantini, and two young aspirants, Pietro Colombo and Callisto Rastelli, the latter a nephew of cleric Caravario.

many souls are in need of faith in you! Little by little Italy begins to disappear. Lord, one again I offer you my sacrifice.”<sup>34</sup>

The day before, 8 October, he had written to his mother: “I am writing to you from the high seas.” After telling her about the trip from Turin to Genoa, the embarkation and the first day at sea, he concluded: “The Lord has given me the strength to gladly and indeed happily make a sacrifice of myself. Continue to pray for me.”<sup>35</sup>

### **“Give me whatever you want as my cross”**

During the solemn farewell ceremony in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, Bishop Filippo Perlo, from the Consolata Missions, and the Vicar Apostolic in Kenya, gave the crucifix to each of the 103 men leaving for various Missions.<sup>36</sup> Cleric Caravario formulated the following prayer which he then wrote into his diary:

“Lord, I do not want my cross to be either light or heavy but as you want it to be. Give me whatever you want as my cross. I only ask that I can gladly bear it.”<sup>37</sup>

This is the peak of perfection: perfect uniformity with God’s will, even in suffering. Fr Caravario would often renew this joyful sacrifice of himself to the Lord, in fulfilment of his will.

“Your sons are going to do good” he writes to his mother from the ship on 26 October. “They often think of Italy; but they think of it without weeping or complaining. They are happy with the sacrifice they have made.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Mother, you can be happy that you have given your sons to the Missions**

The ship made a stopover in Colombo, on the island of Ceylon and the group of missionaries disembarked to visit the city. It was their first contact with the East where they could contemplate the most sumptuous wealth and the most desolate misery side by side, misery that the missionary was called to provide relief from. It was Sunday 26 October 1924. Cleric Caravario wrote in his diary:

“With a heavy heart at the sight of such misery, the prayer of the Church came spontaneously to my lips: ‘That all who are in error may come to unity with the Church and to the light of the Gospel, Lord hear our prayer.’

“We came aboard again, our hearts filled with emotion and pity. In the evening, on the ship’s deck, I said the Rosary facing India and asked the Lord to have pity on its people.”<sup>39</sup>

“We went to visit a Buddhist temple” he wrote to his mother, telling her about the stopover in Colombo. “It was heart-wrenching to see more than three hundred million people worshipping those

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34 *Diary*, p. 10.

35 *Lettere alla mamma (Letters to his mother)*, Arch. Sal 9, 3, Carav.

36 Cf. *Boll. Sal.* November 1924, pp. 281-282.

37 *Diary*, p. 6.

38 *Letters to his mother*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav. Fr Caravario uses the plural because he has his nephew with him, Callisto Rastelli, son of or step-sister of Fr Callisto’s, whom his father Pietro had from his first marriage. The young man was 17 years old and also aspired to Salesian life.

39 *Diary*, p. 26.

false divinities. Mother, you can be happy that you have given your sons to the great and noble work of the Catholic Missions.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Hong-kong! Mother, the sacrifice was a big one but I am happy!**

“After not such a great week at sea,” notes Fr Callisto in his diary on 10 November 1924 “our group found their arrival in Hong-kong something very agreeable from every point of view. Finally that endless voyage was over ... We left the Koblenz with joyful feelings, because in the most recent days it had caused us a lot of suffering.”<sup>41</sup>

The following day, 11 November, after three hours in a steamer, They reached Macao and were given a great welcome by their Salesian confreres. Fr Braga Had come down from Shiu-chow to welcome the group and especially his former student.

“You can see that I have kept my word” said Fr Callisto, embracing him. “Here I am, completely here for the Chinese.”<sup>42</sup>

Fr Caravario gave news of his arrival to his mother and told her, among other things: “I am not at all sorry I have left Italy; indeed I am happy. It was a big sacrifice, I know, but the Lord will help us.”<sup>43</sup>

During the reception given the new missionaries, Fr Caravario was asked to respond to the greetings and best wishes from the community in Macao. He did so in a very sensible way, saying he was ready for any kind of sacrifice, even of his blood, so long as he could bring many souls to God.<sup>44</sup>

### **The technical school in Shanghai**

The group heading for Shanghai left Macao on 16 November and arrived in Shanghai on the 20th, welcomed very warmly by Commissioner Lo Pa Hong.

Commissioner Joseph Lo Pa Hong was well-to do and a Christian businessman who had opened a large hospice in Shanghai named after St Joseph. It could take in more than 1400 people. His idea was to build a technical school beside the hospice.

Negotiations had already begun in 1919 with Fr Versiglia, but only on 4 January 1923 was a proper contract signed, sent by the Salesian Rector Major in Turin.<sup>45</sup>

In July 1923, The Provincial of the Salesians in China went to Shanghai to see to the building of a technical school which had to have a section for working boys and another for students, able to take around 300 pupils.

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40 *Letter of 1 November 1924*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav.

41 *Diary*, p. 31.

42 *Summ.* p. 152.

43 *Letter to his mother, from Macao, 11 November 1924*.

44 *Summ.* p. 152.

45 The documentation relating to this is found in M. Rassiga, *Breve centro storico*, pp.107-117.

When the small group of Salesians arrived in Shanghai, the institute was in an advanced stage of construction; but it could not yet be spoken of as a place to run a school. Since they could not take in boys as yet, they began to seriously study Chinese.

### **Chinese is difficult, but if his mother prays, Callisto will succeed**

“We are studying Chinese” Callisto writes to his mother. “In twenty years time I will learn how to write and stammer out some words. May this too be done in the name of the Lord. We are very happy. We think about Italy because it is impossible not to think about it, But we are very happy to be in China ... My good<sup>46</sup> mother, pray for your Callisto that he can master this language a bit more easily. It is such a difficult language. Pray that he may do some good with it. I never forget my mother: every now and again I look at your portrait and recommend you to Our Lady.”<sup>47</sup>

Two months later he added: “We are studying Chinese. It is not easy; but if my mother prays, Callisto will also succeed in speaking Chinese.”<sup>48</sup>

### **A hundred orphans or abandoned children**

On 16 January 1925 his Rector, Fr Garelli, arrived in Shanghai with another fourteen people between Salesians and aspirants. Together with the first to arrive, they made up a good community of twenty one people.

An orphanage opened in temporary rooms on 24 January and soon took a hundred boys in. They were poor boys, either abandoned or sent to them by the police; they were pitiful cases, often the topic of discussion in Callisto’s letters to his mother. It made him aware of the serious problems the Salesians would need to work to resolve.

“So much misery in this city, mother” he writes two months after his arrival in Shanghai. “Right next to the richest businessman you will find so many people who really do not know what to do to survive. China is full of boys. How much need there is to educate them properly! ... Even just staying with our field of work, education of boys, we will have so much to do!”

He concludes with a reference to what his main task was at the time: “Chinese is difficult, but I am getting there a little at a time.”<sup>49</sup>

### **First catechism lesson in Chinese. My enthusiasm for China is very much alive**

A month later he is able to tell his mother the first results, both for learning the language and for his early contacts with his pupils.

“I have waited until now to reply to your letter,” he writes, “because I wanted to give you some consoling news so that you will not forget the Chinese boys<sup>50</sup>. If the Lord helps us we will not only

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46 His nephew Callisto Rastelli is with Don Callisto.

47 *Letter from Shanghai, 14 December 1924.*

48 *Letter from Shanghai, 28 December 1924.*

49 *Letter, 7 February 1925.*

50 He always associates his nephew, Callisto Rastelli, an aspirant, with him.



make good Christians out of them but also some good Salesians ... Then we will see how much development there will be of Salesian work in China!”<sup>51</sup>

### **The Rector’s right hand man**

In this same letter, Don Caravario described an overview of his field of work. As well as teaching a group of aspirants who had come from Italy, Fr Garelli had made him the assistant for all hundred orphans, seeing to their religious progress, catechism class, preparing them for baptism and confirmation, and looking after recreation.

It was a considerable amount of work. Speaking of it in a postscript in one of Don Caravario’s letters to his mother, Fr Garelli says: “Callisto is always my right hand man. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for having let him come with me. I will pray to our good God to richly reward you for the sacrifice you have made.”<sup>52</sup>

Learning Chinese so as to be able to understand and make himself understood was the first problem.

“I would ask myself if I am happy to be in China” Callisto writes to his mother five months after his arrival in Shanghai. “I am very happy. I am learning to write. This is a work that takes some years, because every word has its own special character. So you need to learn word by word and remember each part of the character. It is something that needs time and patience. I hope I will not be lacking in either of them. Therefore I have also begun to write. One learns to speak it more easily ... I am sure that in Our Lady’s month, when you go to Valdocco, you will remember me in a special way, remember Callisto<sup>53</sup> and our house. Also recommend our Chinese to Our Lady so there can be good Salesian vocations from among them. It is really necessary to have Chinese Salesians. It would be of real help for school, for writing, for everything.”<sup>54</sup>

### **A nurturer of vocations**

This is the second time that “indigenous vocations” recurs as a topic. And there are other times it will recur in his letters to his mother.

Don Caravario was a nurturer of religious and clerical vocations. “Many of the young men from the Oratory have written to me,” he told his mother “saying they would like to come to China. Pray for them too. Our departure has been able to do a little good.”<sup>55</sup>

Four young aspirants from the Oratory in Valdocco arrived in Shanghai with Fr Garelli on 16 January 1925.

Even from China Don Caravario tried to arouse and cultivate the vocations of young people he had known in Italy, continuing to keep up correspondence with them. He recommended one of them with insistence to his mother in a number of letters.<sup>56</sup>

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51 *Letter, March 1925.*

52 *Letter, 15 November 1925.*

53 His nephew Callisto Rastelli.

54 *Letter, 26 April 1925.*

55 *Letter, 20 January 1925.*

A vocation is a gift from the Lord; it develops thanks to the good religious environment and to models around him that a young man can notice.

This was what the orphanage became, with Don Caravario as its religious leader, given that in less than two years from when it began, three pupils asked to study Latin in order to become Salesian priests. “Pray also for our house and our boys” he writes to his mother. “There are already three boys studying Latin because they want to become Salesians.”<sup>57</sup>

### **Loved like a father**

Since Don Caravario was already overloaded with work, the Latin class for these three first little flowers that had flourished in the Shanghai house was entrusted to newly ordained Fr Ernesto Fontana. But they loved Don Caravario, who had followed up the orphanage community with maternal love, and was loved by them as if he were their father.

A letter to his mother presents us with a small scene of the torrid summer days with the thermometer hovering around forty degrees. The letter is typical and significant:

“Dear mother, I am writing to you very early because the summer here is felt in all its vehemence and during the day one does not have much strength left. I am wearing a Chinese tunic which is very comfortable and softer than ours. You keep a fan in hand. Here in China everyone without distinction uses one. In the courtyard there are always some boys who wave a fan instead of mine, and this way we can live.”<sup>58</sup>

On 9 January 1927, Don Caravario, together with other Salesian confreres, had to leave Shanghai, where the revolution had broken out. When the Rector, Fr Garelli went to the entrance with those who were leaving, he turned around and saw a boy who was weeping profusely.

“Why are you crying like this?” he asked him.

“Because Don Caravario is leaving” the boy sobbed even more. It was one of the three Latin students.<sup>59</sup>

This discussion of vocations has taken us a long way forward in time. Let us go back precisely to the end of the first year of the arrival in Shanghai, the study of Chinese and teaching catechism to the orphans.

### **Zealous religious leader. First talks given in Chinese**

“While I am writing to you,” he tells his mother on 15 November 1925 “the boys are studying and singing the catechism questions in chorus. A few of them in the coming week will be confirmed, and I need to prepare them over these days. Every day I give them an hour of catechism. School is easy. For about half an hour we go over what has been studied already. I sing the question and the boys respond in chorus. They do not recite the catechism like our boys do, but sing it in a

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56 *Letters*, 28-6-1926; 17-10-1926; 6-11-1926; 24-7-1927; 3-9-1927; 14-10-1927; 13-12-1927; 27-7-1928. This is the young Giuseppe Canonica. We have spoken earlier of the report on the first encounter with Fr Caravario. Particularly significant are the letters of Fr Callisto to this young man, kept in the Salesian Central Archives.

57 *Letter*, 16 August 1926.

58 *Letter*, 29 June 1925.

59 S. Garelli, *Vita di Don Callisto Caravario*, p. 175.

kind of sing-song voice. This tires them less. Then afterwards, I question them one by one. Almost every Saturday I hold a little contest. With three little holy pictures I can encourage them to study for a few days. They are very keen to hear the facts about Don Bosco's life. Soon we will have some altar servers from among them, and the St Joseph's sodality."<sup>60</sup>

Setting up the sodalities and the altar servers group was a sign that the progress made by the zealous religious animator had been very rapid.

Less than a month later, 13 December 1925, Don Callisto announced that he had given his first very brief talk in Chinese: "We had the feast of the Immaculate. In the evening at school we had a beautiful academy in honour of Our Lady with hymns and items. I have to tell you that I gave the brief introductory address in Chinese. I hope Our Lady was happy."<sup>61</sup>

### **The new technical school. Twenty baptisms**

On 13 January 1926, Don Callisto told his mother that he had been asked to prepare twenty four boys for baptism. The preparation lasted five months. On 31 May 1926, Don Callisto gave two important items of news. And this time the letter was sent to his father, Pietro, because Callisto wanted to send him best wishes for his name day.

Up until now they were living in a temporary home, very small. Finally the large institute wanted by Commissioner Lo Pa Hong was finished.

"We are finally in the new house" he writes to his father. "Yesterday the Consul General of Italy came to see us, along with many other gentlemen from the city. They loved listening to our instrumental band and seeing our gymnastics team, which gave an outstanding performance. We also solemnly celebrated the Feast of Mary Help of Christians and twenty boys were baptised that day. They are the first baptisms. You can imagine our joy and mine too, since I had spent five months preparing them: I was very happy. Here, in the new house, the work has increased. New boys arrive every day, coming from everywhere. and certainly numbers will increase."<sup>62</sup>

### **The thought that my mother is praying for me comforts me and gives me courage**

The young cleric certainly had his difficult moments and the temptation to be discouraged. Of great help to him were his deep piety, his complete confidence in his Rector, and the thought that his mother was praying for him.

"When you receive my letter," he writes to his mother " a year will have passed since I left for China. and after a year I can truly say that I am so very happy to be here ... Certainly, sometimes, even without wanting to, a little discouragement surfaces. But at the thought that my good mother is praying for me, I feel consoled and encouraged."<sup>63</sup>

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60 Letter, 15 November 1925.

61 Letter, 13 December 1925.

62 Letter, 31 May 1926.

63 Letter, 10 September 1925.

Two weeks later he added: “Believe me, mother, the thought that you are praying for me is of great comfort. Often, when something is difficult to do, I do it just the same and say to the Lord: let the merit be my mother’s. I hope the Lord will bless me.”<sup>64</sup>

On yet another occasion he wrote: “You cannot imagine how much pleasure it gives me to think: my mother is praying for me. Then I feel much relieved and go ahead with more courage. Especially in Our Lady’s month, do not forget me. It will be a great pleasure for me to know that my mother is taking my place in the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians in Turin.”<sup>65</sup>

Other than studying Chinese and doing so much work of assistance and religious instruction of the young orphans, Don Caravario was also studying English, necessary for anyone working in the Orient, and also refreshing his knowledge of the French he had learned in school. On 23 June 1926, we find the diary entry written in English and it continues in this language until November. It then stops and takes up in Italian on the day of his departure from Shanghai, 9 January 1927.

### **Beginning theology. The priestly ideal**

“In Shanghai, in 1925, cleric Caravario began his study of theology” his Rector, Fr Garelli writes. “He set about the task very seriously. I had the good fortune to be his teacher and examiner, and I can attest to the fact that he applied himself conscientiously to acquiring the knowledge proper to a minister of God. He always received top marks in his exams.”<sup>66</sup>

As we have seen, “to be a priest” had been little Callisto’s ideal since his early childhood. It was also reflected in those “serious games” he did not want anyone to laugh at.<sup>67</sup> His mother and the church were his two poles of attraction as a small boy, during the years when he needed someone to accompany him in order to go to church.

At an older age he also showed the purpose of his aspiration for the priesthood: the salvation of souls. he had chosen the missions for this, where souls were so much in need of someone to help them find salvation.

As his ordination approached, the ideal of the priesthood filled his soul completely. Since beginning his specific cultural preparation for the priesthood with the study of theology, Don Callisto felt the urgent need to intensify his spiritual preparation. Rarely do we see a soul preparing for the goal of the priesthood with such ardent desire and such a great sense of responsibility.

### **The topic of “preparing for the priesthood” in letters to his mother**

His letters to his mother, his other pole of attraction, are the truest reflection of Don Callisto’s intimate life. Since he began studying theology, the theme of “preparation for the priesthood” returns in them with a frequency and insistence that could seem infuriating if it did not come from a heart that felt the extraordinary need for holiness at every moment, as an essential condition for reaching the priesthood. We find this theme in almost all of his letters. Here we recall just a few of the most frequent comments.

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<sup>64</sup> Letter, 22 September 1925.

<sup>65</sup> Letter, 1 April 1926.

<sup>66</sup> S. Garelli, *Vita di Don Callisto Caravario*, p. 182.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Chapter 22, section entitled ‘You will see what I will become...’

Don Caravario was in Shanghai for six months. “Every day I pray to Our Lady for you,” he writes to his mother on 17 May 1925 “and pray to her for me in a special way so that she may gradually prepare me to be a priest.” Two months later: “The day of my first Mass is still far away, but I never lose sight of it.”<sup>68</sup> Later he insists once again: “Pray to the Lord to help me become a good priest.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Work and prayer, the means of sanctification and preparation for the priesthood**

The letter he wrote on 2 December 1925, to which he added a photograph, begins thus: “Who knows what you will say when you see this photo! You will say I look like a brigand; and you won’t be wrong ... Don’t be afraid if my appearance looks changed somewhat: the good heart is still the same. I am trying to ready myself through work and prayer for the priesthood, so I can do a little bit of good. When I think of the grace the Lord has given me in being here, I cease to be sad at all. It is a sacrifice, but these are merits that will not be lost.”

In the words “work and prayer”, he has indicated the means of sanctification for the Salesian. We do not know if Don Caravario practised extraordinary corporal penances like his companion in martyrdom. But certainly a mortified life, overburdened with work, the often gruelling climate, being with a hundred or more orphans day and night, ups and downs in health, all borne in silence, were no small “Salesian hairshirt”.

### **The more we advance the more we see how great is the grace of being a priest**

On 13 February 1926 a companion of Don Caravario’s, who had come to Shanghai with him, Fr Ernesto Fontana, was ordained a priest. Don Callisto, telling his mother the news as an event “destined to do good for the youngsters of the Institute”, returned to thinking about his own priesthood: “The ideal I am aiming at” he writes, “is very high; and it takes good qualities that I do not have. Pray, mother, that I can prepare myself well. There are still some years to go, but if the Lord helps me, I hope to get there.”<sup>70</sup> Three months later he added: “The more I progress, the more I see the need to prepare myself well for the priesthood.”<sup>71</sup>

Telling his mother that he was ready for some exams in theology, he noted: “And so, bit by bit, I am getting near to the priesthood. On the one hand this is a very comforting thought, but on the other hand it scares me a little because of the serious responsibilities I am taking on ... The more advance the more we see how great is the grace the Lord has given us ... I hope the Lord will continue to help me. And you, mother, continue to pray for me.”<sup>72</sup>

The sublime nature of the goal, the goodness of the Lord toward those whom he has called, their responsibilities faced with this great gift, the inadequacy of human strength, trust in divine assistance called on with ceaseless prayer are the notes that echo constantly in the soul of the young cleric who left everything to follow the Lord and save souls.

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68 Letter, 28 July 1925.

69 Letter, 20 October 1925.

70 Letter, 6 February 1926.

71 Letter, 27 April 1926.

72 Letter, 26 June 1926.

## **I was so sorry to leave Shanghai! May the Lord's will be done**

At the end of 1926, the orphanage, already set up in its new and larger rooms and having grown in numbers, found itself faced with insurmountable problems.

The arrival of Nationalist troops, who left Canton in July 1926, and led by Chiang Kai Shek,<sup>73</sup> had seen an end to business and compromised any industrial work. Commissioner Lo Pa Hong was unable to financially support all the huge charitable works he had opened

The decision was made to reduce the number of young people at the orphanage and at the same time the number of staff. Of the boys, only a group of working boys stayed there who had no family.

“I found myself in very sad circumstances,” writes the Rector, Fr Garelli “needing to make a choice of confreres: keep some and let others go. If ever anyone had a reason to believe he would have stayed, it was certainly Don Caravario. I had trained him since he was a lad, had helped when his mother handed him over; he had been of real help to me for two years in a work that I loved most, the religious instruction and Christian formation of neophytes. Since he had worked with so much zeal for the good of the house, and was of excellent example to everyone, this had to be a guarantee for him that he would not have left. Yet, I had to sacrifice him. When I told him, I saw him look at me once again with those big eyes, then lower his head, and he told me what he always said: “May the Lord's will be done.”<sup>74</sup>

On 9 January 1927 Don Caravario left for Macao with another five confreres.<sup>75</sup>

He told his mother about the transfer only after arriving in Macao and without telling her the exact reason. He knew very well how sensitive his mother was. She lived only for her Callisto and would have suffered immensely if she thought he was in any danger. Already ten days before departure from Shanghai he had tried to comfort her, assuring her that “the war was far off,” and encouraging her “not to believe what the newspapers in Italy were saying.”<sup>76</sup>

He wrote to her from Macao: “As you can see, I have changed my address. Obedience has meant I have changed houses. After a four day voyage by sea, I am now here in Macao, and am awaiting my new destination ... I am very well. Certainly I very much regretted leaving Shanghai, after two years there; but there is no doubt that it was the Lord's will. At the moment I cannot tell you where I will be sent. But wherever I have to go I will be happy. The Lord will arrange it; may his will be done.”<sup>77</sup>

## **Stopover in Macao. A new Salesian work in Timor. Minor orders**

In Macao, Don Caravario discovered his nephew Callisto once more. He had left Shanghai in May 1925 and had now finished his novitiate and made his religious profession. He told his mother the news: “as you can see, our Callisto has finally made his religious profession: he is now a Salesian. I also had the good fortune to be present for the solemn ceremony ... I am continuing with

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<sup>73</sup> See Chapter 13 section on ‘Nationalists and Communists’.

<sup>74</sup> S. Garelli, *Vita di Don Callisto Caravario*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>75</sup> For the date see Fr Caravario's Diary, p. 44, compared with M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, p. 120, where the departure is put as 8 January.

<sup>76</sup> Letter, 28 December 1926.

<sup>77</sup> Letter, 19 January 1927, from Macao.

my studies and preparing myself for an exam in theology. I have also begun studying Portuguese, because it will be of use to me in the country I have to go to ... Pray for me a lot now, since within a year I hope to be ordained a priest. Pray that I will prepare myself well for this great step.”<sup>78</sup>

Twenty days later, Don Callisto told his mother about his new destination: “The Provincial has destined me with another four confreres to open a new house in Dili on the island of Timor. It is an island very far from here, just near Australia. The territory is dependent on the Portuguese Government; ecclesiastically it depends on the Bishop of Macao. We are the first Salesians to go there. We have to open a school of arts and trades. The bishop is also entrusting a parish to us. As you can see, the Salesian work is about to expand, and I can assure you that I am very happy to go there because I have seen that this is the Lord’s will and I must follow it gladly. We are talking about extending Salesian work in a country where Don Bosco is not yet known and where there is so much good to be done. How could I not feel happy with this honour that the Lord is giving me? We will leave on 18 March and arrive at our destination at the beginning of April. as you can see, another beautiful voyage ... This morning I have sat for some exams in theology, and thanks be to God they went well. I am already in the third year; in a little more than a year, if the Lord grants me this great grace, I will be a priest. On 6 March I will receive the tonsure and the four Minor Orders. It is the first step for being ordained a priest. Before receiving these orders I will go on retreat for a few days. In this year of preparation for the priesthood, I am asking you, my good mother, to pray very much for me every day. If a priest needs to be good in our countries, how much more he has to be here where they are all pagans, where the priest must be a model for Christians to form themselves on! Pray, pray much for your Callisto. If he is a good priest you will also be more fortunate and content. You see, then, that it is not only in my interest but yours too that I prepare myself well. During this year and a few months that separate me from my first Mass, pray a lot, a real lot. I know that you want to give me a beautiful chalice. In a few months I will tell you how you can buy it and send it; but believe me, the best gift is that you pray for me.”<sup>79</sup>

Two weeks later he let her know that he had received the tonsure and the four Minor Orders, and he encouraged his mother to “pray and give some alms so that I can arrive at my ordination well prepared and can do very much good.”<sup>80</sup>

### **On the island of Timor**

Half of the island of Timor, the eastern half, had been a Portuguese colony for centuries. Its capital is Dili, with about six thousand inhabitants. The other half had been under Dutch control up until the First World War, and is now part of Indonesia.

As Don Caravario had told his mother, the Bishop of Macao, on whom the Portuguese half of the island depended in ecclesiastical terms, had offered the Salesians a school of arts and trades and the parish of Dili.

On 17 March 1927, five Salesians left Macao for Timor: two priests, a cleric, Don Caravario, and two brothers. They reached Dili on 6 April.

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<sup>78</sup> Letter, 2 February 1927.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Macao, 21 February 1927.

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Macao, 6 March 1927.

“As you can see, my good mother,” Don Callisto writes, “I have to tour the world. So what? It is the Lord who arranges things this way. May his will be done ... Dili is a very small city; rather than a city it seems to be a small town ... The place where we are is very beautiful. Our house is very close to the sea. We are in winter now and it is as hot as it is for us in summer. It is the rainy season and it remains almost every day. Once this season is over it will not rain again for some months.”<sup>81</sup>

### **The Lord’s will and preparation for the priesthood**

“Although the climate is very hot it seems to me to be better than in Shanghai” Don Callisto writes to his mother. “I am really convinced that it is Providence that arranges everything for our good.”<sup>82</sup>

When the cleric Caravario had received the missionary Crucifix from the hands of Bishop Perlo in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, he had said a prayer that his cross be neither heavy nor light but as the Lord wanted it to be.

The Lord’s will is his guiding idea at every junction and for every goal. Right from his earliest childhood his innocent soul had found its pole of attraction in God, and was guided by him without uncertainty or deviation. His only concern was to please Him.

During the two years in Timor (6 April 1927–3 April 1929) this idea was associated with the other one of preparation for the priesthood, which took on a new character now and was to be found in all his letters. His mother was to add almsgiving to her prayers, even though the Caravario family was not wealthy: “We are poor,” writes Don Callisto “but there are so many people who are poorer than us.”<sup>83</sup>

“In the coming year I hope to be a priest ...”<sup>84</sup> “In this year of preparation for my first Mass,” he urges his mother “pray a lot for me, go to Communion often, give some alms, all to obtain the grace that I may prepare myself well for the holy priesthood. Be certain that the Lord will reward you for this charity.”<sup>85</sup> Six months later he adds: “Increase your good works and your almsgiving, and always do it with this intention, that I may really prepare myself well for my first Mass.”<sup>86</sup>

### **A second novitiate**

Toward the end of his stay in Timor, on 6 March 1929, Don Callisto would write to one of his friends who was with him in Shanghai and was now in Siam (Thailand): “The two years in Timor will remain in my memory as two years of novitiate: absolute calm, no concerns. Thus I have been able to get myself in order a bit. I took up some good ascetic reading which I lacked, and I have to say that they were a revelation for me. More than reading a lot I made a resolution to meditate on

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81 *Letter, 7 April 1927*. Leaving Timor Fr Callisto would write in his diary, on a dozen or so pages in tiny handwriting, the most important ideas about the island: size, population, climate, products, illnesses, history, customs, language and dialects, religion and missions. He explains that there are just two seasons: rainy from November to March, during which there are frequent brief downpours, and the dry season. Toward August the winds are strong and vegetation dries off. The temperature oscillates between a maximum of 36 degrees and a minimum of 15.

82 *Letter, 25 May 1927*.

83 *Letter, 6 March 1928*.

84 *Letter, 25 May 1927*.

85 *Letter, 30 June 1927*.

86 *Letter, 13 December 1927*.



what I read.” He then quotes some of the better known ascetic material, giving his impression of each of them. He particularly liked the book by G.B. Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, and resolved to make it his *Vademecum*.<sup>87</sup>

Writing to the same friend from Lin-chow on 25 January 1930, exactly a month before his glorious end, he recalled the two years in Timor: “For my part,” he wrote “while I thank the Lord for having enlightened my mind a little in the two years I spent in Timor, I resolved to continue with my religious studies as much as possible and to get others to share, in sermons, confession, and all the circumstances possible, what I experienced as a great renewal for me. Why do we not always speak and with everyone according to their capacity, of the inexpressible beauty of sanctifying grace, our divinisation, union with Jesus, the real indwelling and life of God in us?”<sup>88</sup>

Don Caravario joined a large community in Shanghai, with work that necessarily took up all his time. In Timor, there were just five confreres, himself included; around thirty boys organised into orderly and continuous school and workshop activity. While scrupulously carrying out his task as assistant and doing so in an apostolic spirit, Don Callisto had the opportunity to enrich his religious culture and encourage his inner urge that had been with him since childhood, when the greatest gift someone could give him was to “lead him to pray”. His relationship with God became more constant, deeper and more intimate in view of the great goal of his entire life: the priesthood and apostolate for souls.

These two years of “second novitiate” took on a precise purpose: to intensify his preparation to be not only a priest but a holy priest.

### **The ideal Salesian cleric**

His Rector, Erminio Rossetti, describes him as “the ideal Salesian cleric: humble, obedient, great piety and activity, and uncommon ability.”

“With him by my side,” he states “I tackled even the most critical situations without fear, because I felt well supported.

“So, I would say to myself, here is the future Superior of the Mission in Timor. With his zeal and piety this little island could become completely Christian in the space of a few years.

“Conscious of the need a missionary has to learn the languages of the place,” Fr Rossetti goes on to say “cleric Caravario zealously set himself the task from the outset, not only to study Portuguese but also the indigenous language; hence in a few weeks he was able to teach the littlest of our pupils to read and write; and after three months he had mastered the local language so well he could teach the prayers and fundamental truths of the faith to some of the older pagan boys and prepare them for baptism.

“Filled with zeal for the good of the youngsters entrusted to him he did not neglect them for an instant. Recreation was always very animated even when the courtyard with the tropical sun burning down on it would have offered easy excuses for lazing about in the shade. But Don Bosco wanted recreations to always be very active, for the health and cheerfulness of the boys, and with his example and attractive nature, he succeeded in getting them all to take part with the same zest

<sup>87</sup> Letter to Fr Paolo Stacul, 6 March 1929, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav.

<sup>88</sup> Letter to Fr Paolo Stacul, 25 January 1920, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav.

that Europeans boys have when they need to amuse themselves and all come together to throw snowballs at each other.

“He had great humility. Capable and learned, with a sufficient enough knowledge of French and English to speak and write in them easily, he could have boasted of his superior knowledge ... instead he preferred to behave as the least of the confreres. How many times he could have easily won and argument in our usual discussions! ... Instead he let others speak, smiled and just made an observation here and there only when he saw truth being falsified or charity or authority being offended.”<sup>89</sup>

### **Deep and sincere piety**

“He had deep and sincere piety” Fr Rossetti continues. “Every day he made frequent and sometimes also long visits to Jesus in the Eucharist. Every evening, after prayers, when everyone had retired and he thought no one would notice, slowly, in bare feet, he would come down from his room, go to our poor little chapel, and kneeling on the predella before the Tabernacle, kneeling up straight, still with hands joined and head bowed,, he would spend a good half hour in adoration before Jesus in the Eucharist.

“I gave him the volumes of the Divine Office as soon as they arrived from Turin, long before his Subdiaconate, an Order he would receive in Shiu-chow. He immediately wanted to learn how to say it even though he was not obliged to, and said it daily with great devotion.”<sup>90</sup>

“I experienced great joy when I saw him praying” writes one of the confreres who were with him in Timor. “I was amazed at seeing him always recollected in deep meditation. No matter how long the religious ceremonies were I always saw him kneeling. Only when he was suffering from malarial fever did he sometimes sit up for a while.”<sup>91</sup>

### **Hidden suffering to save souls**

When Don Caravario wrote to his mother he constantly told her he was well, that the place where he was, was beautiful, the climate good, even if it was hot.

We have seen above that as soon as he arrived in Timor, he assured his mother of all these things. Two months later, on 27 June 1927, he wrote to her: “Thank the Lord I am in good health. The place is very beautiful and also healthier than Shanghai.”

When he would arrive in Lin-chow in July 1929, he would write: “I feel much better here than in Timor. The climate here is much better: the city is surrounded by tall and beautiful mountains.”<sup>92</sup>

The Lin-chow region was known as the Switzerland and China, and rightly, Don Callisto said that he found it much better for him. But his judgements regarding Shanghai and Timor are dictated by his great faith, enabling him to see everything that Providence arranges for him as beautiful, and

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<sup>89</sup> *Memorie di Erminio Rossetti*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Letter of N.N. to Fr Braga, from Shiu-chow, 15 October 1930*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

<sup>92</sup> *Letter, 17 July 1929.*

because of his desire that his mother should feel the loss of her son much less, knowing that although he was far away he was healthy and happy.

In reality, his health was somewhat precarious: he suffered intestinal pains which he hid from everyone. The two Rectors he had in Shanghai and Timor, who were aware of it, never succeeded in getting him to accept any special treatment where food was concerned. In Timor he suffered from malaria, which he could not hide, but it did not lessen his love for work or his affection for this land of his apostolate.

“In 1928 I was sent to the house in Diii on the island of Timor” wrote a young confrere, a brother who had made his novitiate in Macao along with Don Caravario’s nephew. “I accepted the decision gladly because there I would find an excellent confrere who would be of great help in my early experiences of practical life. I arrived in Timor on 28 November, and I had the unfortunate surprise of finding out that Don Caravario was in bed, struck down by malaria. I immediately went to his bedside. As soon as he saw me, he embraced me affectionately and told me as follows: “See, in this land there are many souls to save and the labourers are few; therefore, with the help of the Lord we must save them even at the cost of any sacrifice.”<sup>93</sup>

The sacrifice of daily work, acceptance of suffering to save souls, total gift of self for the good of others; this was the young cleric’s style of asceticism.

### **Poor man! How thin he is!**

When he arrived in Shiu-chow, he loved to spend time in the courtyard with the young people from Don Bosco College. When he first appeared some of them exclaimed:

“Look at the poor man! How thin he is! Where does this terribly undernourished cleric come from?”

“Care from Bishop Versiglia and the other Superiors,” comments the confrere who referred to this episode “did not work so quickly to put some weight on him. I often questioned him about Timor, its climate, the living conditions of our confreres who came back so emaciated from there ... But I never heard a word that would put the blame on people or things.

“It’s all gossip” he said. “As for me, I was very happy to be there; the other confreres felt the same. We were very fond of each other! At our departure everyone was crying.”<sup>94</sup>

This detail was true, and Don Callisto noted it in his diary. It was especially true of him, since he had won the trust and affection of the boys.

### **Salesian vocations in Timor**

Vocations came from Timor as they had from Shanghai. When the Salesians left the island, the Rector brought six students with him to Europe who had asked to become Salesians.

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93 Letter of N.N. to Fr Braga, from Shiu-chow, 15 October 1930, Arch, Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

94 Memorie di Don Antonio De Amicis, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

“These are the seeds Don Bosco sowed and which we now place before him at his altar for his Beatification,” wrote Don Caravario in a letter to Fr Peter Ricaldone, on 2 April 1929.<sup>95</sup>

“They were the result of Don Caravario’s apostolate” attests one of the confreres in Timor. “Even from a distance he continued to keep up a correspondence with these boys.”<sup>96</sup>

### **I will probably be ordained in September**

According to the normal course of events in his theological studies and as foreseen by Don Caravario, 1928 was to be the year of his priestly ordination. The topics in his letters to his mother during this year continued to be: the great dignity of the priesthood, the responsibility it entailed, the sacrifices it imposed, the need for the priest to be holy, to save many souls, and hence the need to pray to obtain this holiness.

The year’s delay, that could have caused some heartache in a less mature young man, but for him it was a “joyful sacrifice” to God for a better preparation.

“Certainly I cannot tell you anything,” he wrote to his mother on 18 March 1928 “but probably I will be ordained in September ... To be a priest is a great dignity, but also a great responsibility ... ‘To begin to say Mass means to begin to suffer.’ This was what Mamma Margaret said to Don Bosco on the day of his first Mass. So, help me with your prayers.”

He constantly asked his mother to go and pray for him at Don Bosco’s tomb at Valsalice and in the Sanctuary of Our Lady Help of Christians.<sup>97</sup>

### **I have chosen two protectors and models for my ordination**

Closer to the great day, he chose two powerful protectors and models for himself: “I do not know how to tell you about everything going on in my heart at the thought of soon being a priest” he wrote on 15 April 1928. “I feel unworthy of such a grace and I am afraid of the terrible responsibility.

“I have already chosen Blessed Cafasso and Don Bosco as patrons for my ordination. My good mother, take my place in going to them. Go to the Consolata where you will find Fr Cafasso’s tomb, and to Valsalice, to pray to Don Bosco for me.

“Entrusted to two such holy priests, I also hope to become a holy priest. Pray for this because it is also in your interests. If the son is good, it will be the merit and glory of his mother.”<sup>98</sup>

### **The priest must truly be a holy priest**

In June 1928, Don Callisto could still not give any certain news about his ordination. But he pointed to important decisions the Superiors were taking regarding the house in Dili: “I recommend the house in Dili very much to your prayers. The Superiors are about to take some important

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95 Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav.

96 Letter of N.N. to Fr Braga, from Schiu-chow, 15 October 1930, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

97 Letters, 13 December 1927 and 8 February 1928.

98 Letter, 15 April 1928.

decisions with regard to this work, Pray that it may be as the Lord wants. You will certainly be waiting for news about my first Mass. The Lord is still letting me wait a bit so that I can prepare myself well ... Pray a lot. The further I go on the more I am convinced that the priest, if he really wants to do good and be up to his ministry, must truly be a saint. So pray to the Lord that he may help me to be truly like this and that I can do some good for my soul and the souls of others. There is so much to do! There are millions of souls who have not yet received the light of the Gospel or who live wretchedly. Thousands of missionaries would not be enough. Instead, there are very few missionaries.”<sup>99</sup>

### **He asks the Lord that everything may be to his greater glory**

In July, Don Callisto once again told his mother: “We are waiting for the decisions of the Superiors regarding our house. Pray so that the Lord will arrange everything to his greater glory ... Oh, how often I think of you! I pray for each of you to the Lord morning and evening ... I have never been so united with the family as I am now at such a distance. The Lord will certainly not fail to bless our sacrifice and help us. For my part, I am well. I have finished my exams and am preparing myself for the holy Mass. I do not know precisely when because the bishop is not here and we do not know when he will be coming. But when matters very little. My good mother, pray a lot for me and recommend me to the prayers of your friends and acquaintances.”<sup>100</sup>

### **Not what I want but what you want**

Just at that time, at the end of July 1928, the Superiors had passed on their decision to close the house in Dili. The confreres would need to leave Timor at the end of the current year, 1928 or in the early months of 1929.

This also meant there was no hope of having a bishop in Dili who would ordain Don Caravario, so the only other solution remaining was for him to anticipate his return, leaving his work without anyone to replace him, or delay his ordination.

“Given the serious nature of this sacrifice,” the Rector says “I did not dare suggest openly to him my hope that he would remain, delaying his ordination. I just left him to guess. It was enough, because he said to me immediately: “Not what I want, but what you want and what would be of greatest benefit for the house. I will stay and we will all leave together.”<sup>101</sup>

### **My excellent Superiors are thinking about my first Mass more than I have thought about it myself**

Here is how he explained the long delay to his mother: “You would certainly like to know, my good mother, when I will say my first Mass. It is a while since I spoke to you about this.

“The beautiful chalice you have given me as a gift has arrived, you might say, but it is the Mass which has not yet arrived ...

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99 Letter, 27 June 1928.

100 Letter, 27 July 1928.

101 *Memorie di Don Erminio Rossetti*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

“And you would be right to say that. But even this time I do not know what to tell you. We are awaiting decisions regarding our house from Turin and Macao. There is no bishop here and he will not come very soon. Therefore we need to make necessity of virtue and wait a little. However, do not worry about it. My excellent Superiors are thinking about my first Mass more than I have thought about it myself. I am very happy that I still have to wait a bit; This way I have more time to be able to prepare myself well. Let us allow the Lord to do as he wishes.”<sup>102</sup>

### **Let us leave it to the Lord!**

God’s will is the main thread in his life.

Over the following months he continued to console and comfort his mother so that she would not feel the delay: “It is a complex set of circumstances completely independent of us, making us wait”, he writes. “I am in no hurry myself. My Superiors are doing everything possible to hasten the day and they are more involved than I deserve. Let us leave things a little for the Lord to act. At any rate, it cannot be too delayed. Double your prayers, my good mother. Don Bosco used say that a priest does not go to heaven nor hell alone. So pray not only for me but also for the souls he wishes to entrust to my ministry. Recommend me to Fr Cafasso and Don Bosco who will be my patrons on that memorable day.”<sup>103</sup>

In a postscript at the bottom of the letter he says: “We have received the news that we are returning to China. May the Lord’s will be done!”

### **Finally I am leaving. Obedience is always the better thing**

“Finally, after having been postponed for a good five months, the day has come for leaving Timor” Don Caravario wrote in his diary on 3 April 1929. Personally, much regret, since this is a vast and new field where I could have exercised the first fruits of my priestly ministry. As a religious, I can only but see that the Superiors’ thinking is correct in abandoning these works built up by foreign patrons and missions.”<sup>104</sup>

The day before, 2 April, he had expressed the same conviction in a letter to the Prefect General, Fr Peter Ricaldone and concluded: “Seeing how events have turned out, I am once more convinced that obedience is always the better thing.”<sup>105</sup>

### **I am going to China where martyrdom awaits me**

Before their departure, Don Callisto, with a group of boys and a Salesian confrere, had gone to the nearby Mission run by Portuguese priests and the Canossian Sisters to say a final goodbye.

“They welcomed us joyfully” says a confrere who was present; “but this changed to sadness when they knew it was the last time we would be visiting them. During the conversation Don Caravario said he was going to China where martyrdom would be awaiting him. The good Sisters

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<sup>102</sup> Letter, 20 September 1928.

<sup>103</sup> Letter, 14 November 1928.

<sup>104</sup> Diary, p. 69.

<sup>105</sup> Lettera a Don Pietro Ricaldone, 2 April 1929, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav.

and the missionaries sought to distract him from that thought; but smiling, he said it once more. and he said it yet again on our way back to the house.”<sup>106</sup>

“Martyrdom, as the supreme test of love for God and for souls was, one could say, Don Caravario’s habitual topic” writes his Rector, Fr Rossetti. “A topic that I often stirred him gladly to talk about, enjoying seeing him get animated and answer the objections of anyone who did not share his enthusiasm and said that one could be very good missionaries without wanting to be killed.”<sup>107</sup>

### **He was timid by nature**

Anyone who has followed Don Caravario’s life from childhood to this point, his choice of the missions, his way of conducting himself in the not so easy setting in Shanghai, and now in Timor, could have gained the idea that he was naturally of a strong and combative temperament, and this would mean that the tough moments of virtue somehow came naturally to him. It was completely the opposite: a beautiful soul filled with divine grace, but a timid temperament, reserved and very sensitive.

“Of all my companions I do not recall one as good as him, but also one who was more timid than he was” writes Fr Pietro Zerbino, who was with him at the Oratory in Valdocco during high school years and then at Valsalice during their final two years of high school.”Anything would scare him; a severe look from a teacher would terrify him; a rustling in the bush among the dry leaves of a hedgerow during our walks and he would jump with fright. We little mischievous types had learned the subtle art of amusing ourselves at these outbreaks of timidity which were easily provoked. None of us then would have been able to imagine our companion Caravario standing serenely in front of pirates!”<sup>108</sup>

This is an accurate judgement. The one who is writing had also spent a year with cleric Caravario and can be listed among the “mischievous types” who found his timidity amusing. But his gaze revealed an inner strength, a supernatural grace that made him strong on every occasion when a true spiritual value was at stake.

### **A life of clarity from sunrise to sunset**

One of his teachers who had known him and followed him from childhood until his glorious end, says very beautifully that his life was “a life of clarity from sunrise to sunset.”<sup>109</sup>. This is the direction all testimonies to him take. But this perpetual clarity was defended, day after day, by a strength of will and attachment to God of heroic proportions. He knew how to witness to God

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106 *Letter of N.N. to Fr Braga, Shiu-chow, 15 October 1930*. Cf. also the oral report by Bro Roberto Verona to Fr Braga: “Fr Caravario was edifying in everything, and seemed like the rule personified; he was exemplary in purity. Timor speaking of our return to China, he would often say: “We will go back to China to die as martyrs.” This was constantly on his lips, so much so that we said: “You will die a martyr but we certainly will not” (*Memoirs of Fr Carlo Braga to Fr Garelli*, from Macao, 6 October 1930; Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.)

107 *Memorie di Don Erminio Rossetti*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

108 Fr Pietro Zerbino, *La missione del sacerdote cattolico negli scritti inediti di un missionario*, in «Osservatore Romano», 25-26 February 1935.

109 *Letter of Fr Braga to Fr Garelli, 6 October 1930*, Arch. Sal. 9,2, Carav.

always, even when this witness was the very opposite of his temperament. The clarity and holiness of his beautiful soul were an heroic conquest on a daily basis.

### **A moving separation**

The diary opens the account of the departure from Timor with a touching prayerful thought: “By now, my poor diary, all you seem to be able to do is to record departures. This is the way the Lord wants it: May his will be done!”<sup>110</sup>

After other news, he notes: “The boys are coming with us until we board. At the moment of departure we will begin to weep, and it will be a pitiful scene.”<sup>111</sup>

The good missionaries had not sown among these hearts in vain. Also Don Callisto carried something in his heart of the most pleasant memories of what he called “the Timor parenthesis”,<sup>112</sup> two years of intense preparation for the priesthood and of fruitful apostolate that had conquered the hearts of these youngsters.

### **Stopover in Hong-kong. Headed for the Mission in Shiu-chow**

After fifteen days voyage by sea that he describes as “truly happy”,<sup>113</sup> he arrived in Hong-kong where he stayed for a few days.<sup>114</sup>

From here he gave his mother the news that he was destined for the Mission in Shiu-chow and would be ordained priest on the Feast of Pentecost, which was 19 May that year.

The letter was written on 19 April, exactly a month earlier. It ends thus: “I will have the fortune to be a priest in the month of May, close to the Feast of Mary Help of Christians. Isn’t Our Lady so very kind to me? Pluck up courage. To have a son a priest is a great grace and a great honour. Courage! In Paradise the Lord will reward you for all the sacrifices made out of love for him.” The next letter to his mother would be on the day of his priestly ordination.

At Shiu-chow Don Callisto found his primary school teacher and great friend Fr Braga, the Rector of Don Bosco College.

“I was very much struck by his extreme thinness and physical weakness” he writes “but I found him smiling and pious. Despite still being sick with malaria and the rigours of the voyage, and not knowing the Hakka dialect, he set to work immediately with recreations with the youngsters and helping me with the various assistance tasks, even though he didn’t need to.”<sup>115</sup>

### **The long-desired goal: Subdeacon, deacon, Priest**

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110 *Diary*, p. 58.

111 *Diary*, p. 70.

112 *Diary*, p. 58.

113 *Letter to his mother*, 19 April 1929.

114 The diary describes, on a daily basis, the journey to Hong-kong from 3-15 April 1929: “On the night of the 15th we passed Manila.” And it ends thus. Two blank pages follow and this is the end of the notebook. It is a school notebook of twenty sheets, eighty pages; the first page begins with 1 October 1924, the last two pages (79-80) are blank. Probably Fr Caravario had begun a new book for the time spent in Shiu-chow and Lin-chow. We do not have it. It is possible that it was destroyed during the destruction and burning of Mission material which the pirates did before killing the two missionaries.

115 *Summ.* p. 153.



But his greatest task was to improve the preparation that had informed his entire life and had intensified in the two years in Timor.

“I can say that Don Callisto prepared himself with great devotion and seriousness for Holy Orders. He fully understood the very great dignity he was being elevated to and the very serious responsibility he was taking on. He made a serious retreat beforehand. Every time for whatever reason I came to him he asked me kindly but firmly to leave him be. and he immediately resumed his recollection before God.” This is the testimony of a friend who was with him during the retreat, who was also preparing for the Subdiaconate.<sup>116</sup>

On Thursday 9 May 1929, the Feast of the Ascension, Bishop Versiglia conferred the Subdiaconate on Don Caravario, and on Sunday 12 May, the Diaconate. Then on Saturday 18 May, the vigil of Pentecost, the priesthood. On Pentecost Sunday Don Callisto solemnly sang his first Mass.

The news item regarding his ordination to the priesthood records a touching note: at the end of the solemn ceremony, those present were moved by the embrace the revered Bishop Versiglia gave the young priest, so similar to him in beauty of soul and thin body worn out by work and austerity. He was about to join him in the supreme sacrifice of his life.

### **Your Callisto is a priest forever**

The letter to his mother, written on the day of his ordination, better reflects any other testimony in the feelings of this beautiful soul as he ascended the altar of the Lord's sacrifice for the first time, a few months before his own sacrifice in giving witness to Him.

Shiu-chow, 18 May 1929

“My dearest mother,

“I am writing to you today, my good mother, with a heart filled with joy.

“This morning I was ordained a priest by our Salesian Bishop.

“Your Callisto is a priest forever. Thank the Lord with me with all your heart for this truly extraordinary grace. I had to wait a little; however, the Lord did not let our prayers go unheard. My heart's great desire is now fulfilled.

“Tomorrow I will ascend the altar to celebrate the first solemn Mass right on the day of Pentecost. The Lord will come down for the first time into my hands, and I hope he will be abundant with his graces.

“What should I say to you my good mother? That you thank the Lord with me and ask him to grant that I may be faithful to the solemn promises I have made to him.

“By now your Callisto is no longer yours; he must be the Lord's completely, dedicated completely to his service. I hope he will grant me this grace. By now think of nothing else but praying that I may be a holy priest, an excellent example to those who see me, and fully dedicated to the Lord's cause.

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116 Testimony of Fr Antonio De Amicis, *Summ.* p. 328.

“Will my priesthood be short or long term? I do not know.

“What is important is that I do it well, and that when I present myself to the Lord, I can say that I have, with his help, made use of the graces he has given me.

“I assure you that tomorrow, in my first Mass, using the chalice you have given me, I will not fail to pray very much for you and for everyone at home. Then on Monday I will celebrate my second mass just for the family. I am certain that the Lord will listen to my poor prayers and bless you.

“I recommend myself very much to your prayers and assure you that I will remember you every day at the Holy Mass. Going to the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians, do not forget to thank Our Lady and Don Bosco for me; also thank Fr Cafassa very much and ask them to be my patrons during my priesthood. may I save many other souls as well as my own.

“I thank you wholeheartedly for everything you have done for me, the sacrifices you have made and your prayers, and with all my heart I give you my first blessing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

“Your most affectionate son,

“Don Callisto”

Two days later he also wrote to his elderly father: “You have given a son to the Missions, and deprived yourself of someone who could have helped you Be assured that the Lord will bless you, and will reward you richly in Paradise for your sacrifice. I will remember you every day in the Holy Mass.”<sup>117</sup>

## **First Mass**

Pentecost Sunday was dedicated, by the community of confreres and boys at the Don Bosco College, to honouring the new priest.

After the solemn sung Mass, the confreres, seminarians, pupils and faithful waited at the door of the church for the new priest to render homage. But he gave no indication of leaving: kneeling before the altar he was absorbed in thanking the Lord. A confrere went in to take him by the arm and led him outside.

In the evening, at the academy, there were addresses in Chinese, English and Latin. A young Chinese read an item in excellent Italian. Don Callisto’s eyes widened in astonishment and he whispered to the one next to him: “But how did he learn that?”. He smiled with pleasure and was much moved.

It was something that he had read out as an eleven-year-old boy, in 1914, when Fr Braga had been ordained priest in Turin. His teacher had brought it with him among the mementos from his first Mass. When one of the confrere translated it into Chinese and explained to the many pupils what it was about, applause broke out for the new priest and their Rector Fr Braga.

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<sup>117</sup> Letter, 20 May 1929.

At the end, Don Caravario read an address in the Hakka dialect of the region. There was a general murmur of astonishment:

“How has he mastered the local dialect so well in such a short time?”. He then concluded with a few sentences in English. The pupils couldn’t stop applauding, raising the two thumbs of their hands with closed fists and exclaiming: Tai-yat, perfect, magnificent!<sup>118</sup>

“By now the boys had been won over. In the month he spent with them he was able to approach many of them and carry out the apostolate that had attracted so much interest and had been so fruitful at the oratories in Turin, Shanghai and Timor.

He won the respect not only of the young but also of the confreres. “I can attest,” writes Bishop Michele Arduino, then a cleric at Shiu-chow “that during the few months that Don Caravario spent in Shiu-chow after his ordination, he demonstrated deep piety and ardent apostolic zeal.”<sup>119</sup>

“He was so much respected that as soon as he was ordained a priest he was chosen as the ordinary confessor, even by confreres older than himself” Fr Braga testifies.<sup>120</sup>

### **Missionary at Lin-chow**

Bishop Versiglia sent the young priest to the Mission at Lin-chow. The good climate in that region would also help his physical health.

In the first week of July, Don Caravario reached the place joining the happy group of pupils from Don Bosco who had finished the school year and were returning to their home towns. Four hours by train to Lin-kon-ghow and then six days by boat on the Lin-chow river, through a broad and verdant valley of fields sown with rice, sometimes boxed in by mountains.

The boat ploughed against the current with exasperating slowness. But Don Caravario was in good company, the kind he liked. He continued his outstanding apostolate among the boys, one of kindness, warmth and calm cheerfulness which penetrated hearts.

At Lin-chow his first concern was to study the local language, Hakka. As soon as he was able to make himself understood he set to work. He wrote out his sermons and evening talks for the boys and learned them by heart.

“Poor kids” he would say, “what a sacrifice they have to make to listen to me!”

But they listened gladly, because even when they did not understand all the words or couldn’t even grasp the meaning, they still glimpsed a heart filled with the love of God and kindness toward neighbour.<sup>121</sup>

### **He won the respect and affection of everyone**

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118 Cf. *Memorie di Don Antonio De Amicis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

119 *Summ.* pp. 317–318.

120 *Summ.* p. 260.

121 Cf. S. Garelli, *Vita di Don Caravario*, p. 287. On 1 November 1929, Fr Caravario wrote to his nephew Callisto Rastelli, who was in Hong Kong: “I am in good form: I am exercising the patience of those who have to listen to my poor sermons and I am trying to do some good for my soul” (Postcard, in Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav.).

“As soon as he arrived in Lin-chow,” writes Fr Parisi, his mission companion, “he made friends with the pupils at our school, especially the ones in the small boarding section. He soon got to know each one’s character and how to lead him to the Lord, as a true educator of hearts. It was moving to see, a few times a day, the pupils, be they Christian or pagan, being encouraged by him to go to the chapel to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. He had taught them all how to serve Mass. Under his guidance they diligently studied their catechism. In short, he had won the respect and affection of all.

He visited families, accompanied by a Chinese catechist.

At first he would only mutter a few words, leaving the main task to the catechist. Later it was he who kept the conversation alive, full of good thoughts which penetrated the soul. He often went to visit the sick and every month consoled those who could not go to the chapel due to old age or illness, with Holy Communion.”<sup>122</sup>

### **As an elderly Salesian I learned some lessons from him**

Over those few months he also faced up to the fatigue of apostolic journeys: thirty, fifty kilometres on foot, lodging wherever possible. Fr Guarona, the veteran of the Mission, went with him on one occasion. He was amazed by his spirit of sacrifice and adaptation.

“As an old missionary,” writes Fr Guarona “I learned lessons from him and was encouraged to be more zealous.<sup>123</sup> In the few months I was with him at Lin-chow to introduce him to missionary life, I prepared in writing a good number of little talks to give at the end of Mass, as we do in Salesian institutes in the Goodnight; and he encouraged me to give them myself every day.

“The brief period of time spent with him was more than sufficient for me to know that he was an exemplary religious, one of great prudence and charity. He was not just a new priest but a minister of God who was mature and all taken up with his priestly ministry.

“Such intense fervour meant a continuous interior life. He was most edifying in the celebration of the Holy Mass. His composure when visiting the Blessed sacrament was striking, and in the last days these were so frequent and prolonged as to make one think that he had some foreboding of his end.

“His particular virtues and zeal demonstrated, in those few months of missionary apostolate” Fr Guarona concludes “are an invitation to promote his Beatification, to point to him as a model of the missionary priest.”<sup>124</sup>

### **Priest means to say a model in everything and for everyone**

In his letters to his mother we always find an echo of the intimate life and inner motivation for Don Callisto’s actions.

After four months of missionary activity at Lin-chow, he wrote to his mother:

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122 *Summ.* pp. 389–390

123 Fr Giovanni Guarona and Fr Lodovico Olive were the first missionaries in the Salesian Mission at Shiu-chow (See Chapter 11 and ff.).

124 *Summ.* pp. 177–178.

“I am happy this time to be able to send you my photograph. Five years have passed since my departure, and as you see, my face too has changed. However, my heart is always the same and no matter how many years pass, it holds the same affection for the family ... every day I remember you in my poor prayers and especially at Holy Mass; pray for me too that I may correspond less unworthily to the vocation the Lord has given me. The work of the poor missionary is as difficult as ever and it needs the Lord to help and assist in everything. China is a very special country ... For many, becoming a Christian is very difficult, especially in these times. Many things are said against our religion.<sup>125</sup> So difficulties have increased — Recommend me to my two special patrons, Fr Cafasso and Don Bosco so they can help me do some good for myself and others ... You know what it means to be a priest. It is not enough just to say Mass; in everything one needs to be exemplary in behaviour, especially here in these countries. Ask the Lord to increase my faith and help my good will.”<sup>126</sup>

Don Callisto realised the ideal he had in his soul in his everyday life. Testimony to this are the confreres who were with him and the Christians for whom he worked.

A Chinese teacher who was teaching at Lin-chow and who was in constant contact with Don Caravario attests: “No missionary speaks and says things like he does. No one gives an example like his.”<sup>127</sup>

Fr Braga, who had welcomed the young boy Callisto Caravario at primary school and then followed him up as a friend for the rest of his life, sums up his impressions and the deposition made for the process of Beatification, thus: “I saw and considered Don Callisto Caravario as a perfect model of a young lad, a cleric, a Salesian and a missionary priest. His characteristics were: purity, piety, kindness, sacrifice. Although I had been his teacher, I felt he was much superior in virtue and zeal.”<sup>128</sup>

“Zeal for the salvation of souls was Don Caravario’s badge” says a missionary who was at Shiu-chow at the time.<sup>129</sup>

### **“We really are lambs among wolves!”**

On 8 December 1929, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Don Callisto wrote to a novice whom he had guided toward Salesian life.<sup>130</sup>

“In this novitiate year, leave every other thought behind,” he recommended “and reserve your thoughts just for yourself, the study of your soul. Study the first article of our Constitutions well ... Keep in your head the fact that we join the Congregation first of all to improve our soul.”

And he drew up a complete program of life. He then went on to give some news.

“I am at Lin-chow, the furthest district away in our Mission. For some months I have been alone. I see a confrere once a month. Here we have two little schools and the beginnings of a Christian

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125 Fr Caravario alludes to the Bolshevik propaganda and the lies spread against the missionaries. We have often spoken of this in earlier chapters

126 *Letter, 10 November 1929.*

127 *Summ.* p. 158.

128 *Summ.* p. 158.

129 Testimony of Fr Bartolomeo Fochesato, *Summ.* p. 133.

130 Giuseppe Canonica. Earlier we saw his encounter with cleric Caravario at the St Aloysius Oratory in Turin. Fr Callisto frequently recommends him to his mother.

community. The city has around 40,000 inhabitants; there are around 200 Christians, all of the first generation. Far from fishing with a net, we fish with a hook for each of the souls the Lord sends us. My dear Beppino, recommend us to the Lord. We really are like lambs among wolves. The Nationalist wave has set the Chinese nation on the path of industrial progress but has left the soul empty, and casts discredit on the old national religion and distrust in our religion ... For Christmas we will have a pastoral visit from Bishop Versiglia and we will also have some baptisms.”<sup>131</sup>

Don Callisto gave his mother the same news four days later.<sup>132</sup>

### **At Shiu-chow to accompany the bishop. Final letter to his mother**

Contrary to what he had predicted, the war situation had led Bishop Versiglia to put off his visit, and only at the beginning February 1930, did Don Caravario go down to Shiu-chow to accompany the bishop on his journey to Lin-chow.

“Some days ago I left my residence in Lin-chow,” Don Callisto wrote to his mother “and came here to the Mission centre. The journey took four days. Two of us left there, myself and a young Chinese.

“For three days on the boat nothing serious happened. Only on the last part did pirates board our boat. They were armed with rifles and pistols. However, they were good to us. They were happy to stay aboard for a few hours, then they got off. As you can see, the Lord was truly good to us ...”<sup>133</sup>

“In a few days time I will leave here with our bishop and some young people who have finished their studies and are returning to Lin-chow. We will spend a good week on the boat.<sup>134</sup> The way back is full of pirates, however we are sure the Lord will help us. Even in the face of such people our heart is calm and tranquil.”

“Oh, how we feel we are in the hands of the good God ... Have courage my good mother! As you can see, life is constant suffering; however, in prayer and confidence and unlimited trust in the Sacred Heart of Jesus and in Mary Help of Christians, we will find peace even amid so much pain.

“Let nothing disturb you or frighten you. God to Mass each day and receive holy Communion; and when Jesus is in your heart, after having adored and thanked him, confidently tell him all your sorrows; tell him you believe he will help you. Our family is consecrated to the Sacred Heart; if we have trust in him he will certainly help us and will give us strength to carry our cross and do some good for our soul.

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131 *Lettere a Giuseppe Canonica*, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav.

132 *Letter*, 12 December 1929.

133 The following day, 14 February, Fr Callisto gives the same news to his brother Andrea, in similar terms, but much more significant: “Only on the third day” he writes “when we were about to arrive, our boat was stopped by two other boats, full of pirates armed to the teeth. Those good people (clearly a note of sarcasm) jumped onto our boat, and seeing there was a priest who did not have much luggage, came with us for about two hours, then saying goodbye like old friends, they left us.” Fr Caravario highlights two features of the pirates of the ‘old brigade’ we could say. The priest is a person they respect, an old friend; the lack of luggage smothered any thoughts of robbery. The pirates Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario meet two weeks later in the same region are not of the same stamp. They are of the “Bolshevist stamp” and look upon the two missionaries with homicidal intent, only thinking of prey when they see that there are three girls, whom the missionaries could not abandon to their evil desires.

134 Going down from Lin-chow, Fr Callisto spoke of three days by boat: here he speaks of a week, because when going against the current the boats were agonisingly slow.

“Life will pass and sorrows will come to an end: we will be happy in Paradise. Let nothing disturb you my good mother; if you carry your cross in company with Jesus, it will be much lighter and more pleasant.

“And now I recommend myself to you. You have sent me beautiful gifts; knowing the delicacy of your heart, I will hold on to them dearly. However, the most beautiful gift you can give me is to pray much for me. Only the constant help of the Lord can sustain me in my life as a priest and a missionary. Pray, pray much for me that I may be a holy priest, solely dedicated to my soul and the souls of others. I know that up till now you have always prayed that I might arrive at the priesthood. Now that I am a priest, pray that I may be a holy priest ... There are so many difficulties; I need to live alone for some period of time. The world is horrible. I need to be a guide for our Christians; so I need special assistance from the Sacred Heart.

“Every day I remember you with papa, Andrea and Vica in the Holy Mass. I have entrusted the family to the Sacred Heart of Jesus; therefore, I am sure that he will not allow you to miss out on what is needed, as he does not allow that to happen to us who live off alms... »

This was his last letter to his mother. It was written from Shiu-chow on 13 February 1930. Twelve days later, on 25 February, Don Callisto consummated his sacrifice.

When his mother read this letter, Fr Braga, who had come to Italy for Don Bosco's Beatification, had already told her some time earlier of her son's glorious end, passed on by telegram to the Salesian Superiors and by news agencies to the Italian press.

The letter, which I have in front of me, is all stained with Don Callisto's mother's tears that have turned the paper yellow.

### **Don Caravario has arrived!**

“One evening, during the first ten days of February 1930 while I was assisting in the courtyard,” writes the confrere who had made the retreat in preparation for the Subdiaconate along with Don Caravario, and who had remained in Shiu-chow “I saw that the boys were running toward the door and I heard them shout: “Don Caravario has arrived!” They all crowded around him, wanting to see and listen to their friend and teacher. There were about forty of them from Lin-chow, and they never stopped talking about the beauty of their region, the good rice ... but especially about the wonderful qualities of their missionary. You could see that they had the greatest respect for him and really loved him.”<sup>135</sup>

“Over the few days spent at Shiu-chow while waiting to leave with Bishop Versiglia,” Fr Guarona tells us “he carried out a real mission among the boys at our Don Bosco schools, being with them in a loving way during recreations that gave him an opportunity to leave his spiritual children at Lin chow with final reminders ... He loved to say his breviary in the church, and I would say that he had a presentiment of something serious because in those final days at Shiu-chow one could say he spent them all at the feet of Jesus in the Eucharist, in long hours of adoration.”<sup>136</sup>

“He spent these final days in constant prayer” says his ordination companion, Fr De Amicis. “He stayed in church for a long time saying the Divine Office, almost all the time kneeling. The boys

<sup>135</sup> *Memorie di Don Antonio De Amicis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

<sup>136</sup> Fr Giovanni Guarona in Fr Caravario's mortuary letter, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

who were his parishioners said that he did the same thing at Lin-chow. 'But now,' they said 'he is doing it even more.'"<sup>137</sup>

"He gave me the impression that he felt inwardly that his sacrifice was near," Bishop Versiglia's secretary, Fr Larena says "and that he was there before his Lord to tell him: 'Here I am, I am ready. Take me!'"<sup>138</sup>

### **The last day at Shiu-chow... spent completely before Jesus in the Eucharist**

Fr Pietro Battezzati tells us: "Bishop Versiglia had asked me to bring him an article of clothing he had left in my residence at Lok-chong. I gladly went down to Shiu-chow, also because I wanted to see and spend time with my novitiate companion Don Caravario once more before he left for Lin-chow.

It was the final day of his stay at Shiu-chow, Sunday 23 February.

In the morning I waited at the door of the church after Mass; but he did not come out until lunchtime. He went back there immediately afterwards to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, a visit that lasted until supper time and was continued immediately after supper.

I waited for him again at length after the community had said evening prayers; then I went to my room, a little annoyed and very much in admiration of such a thirst for prayer.

I was about to go to bed when I heard a knock at the door.

It was Don Caravario who came to say goodbye.

"Like the shepherd, then so are the sheep" he told me with deep conviction. Then he said goodbye in kind and gentle fashion as was his wont."<sup>139</sup>

The long hours of intimacy with Jesus before the Tabernacle had made him even more convinced that to convert souls and lead them to God, the priest must be like Jesus the Good Shepherd: holy and ready to give his life for his sheep. He wanted to be like that.

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<sup>137</sup> *Memorie di DonAntonio De Amicis*, Arch. Sal. 9, 2, Carav.

<sup>138</sup> *Summ.* p. 21.

<sup>139</sup> Oral testimony by the author, from Rome Istituto San Giovanni Bosco (Cinecittà), 23 March 1976.



## THE MARTYRDOM OF TWO SAINTS

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### **Final achievement: the seminary**

Following the retreat given by the Prefect General, Fr Ricaldone, from 13 to 20 September 1927, Bishop Versiglia took in the Latin students, giving them accommodation in the Bishop's quarters. During the day they continued to attend the Don Bosco Institute for classes, meals and recreations, but unfortunately, they still had to follow their classmates to the frequent meetings held in the city and hear things that went against their religious feelings.

Later, it was possible to arrange things such that the life of these aspirants to the priesthood could revolve entirely around the Bishop's House, except for school. But even this solution became inadequate, because contact with their sometimes pagan classmates and teachers presented a negative side for the formation of boys on the way to the priesthood.

A proper seminary for indigenous clerical vocations had always been Bishop Versiglia's dream.<sup>1</sup> The house at Ho-sai could have been adapted to this purpose, now that the difficulty for the teaching staff coming every day from the city had led to transferring all the classes to Don Bosco. But there would have been a need for considerable repair and adaptation work, and the state of the finances would not allow it. They were helped by the generosity of Catholics in Montreal, in Canada, where Bishop Versiglia had left an excellent impression. They offered a conspicuous sum for the seminary.

During the retreat in September 1929, Bishop Versiglia was able to announce that the seminary was about to become a reality.

At the end of November, the bishop had to make a pastoral visit to Lin-chow, where he had not been for more than three years (March 1926). He had the intention of spending Christmas there. This news was also given by Fr Caravario in the letter to his mother that we commented on earlier.

Chinese confrere, Brother Michael Leung from Lin-chow had come down from Shiu-chow to accompany the bishop on his journey.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Versiglia's aspirations and concerns aimed at realising one of the most pressing recommendations of the Encyclical *Maximum Illud* by Benedict XV, the *magna carta* of the Missions. In no. 14 it says: "There is one final, and very important, point for anyone who has charge of a mission. He must make it his special concern to secure and train local candidates for the sacred ministry. In this policy lies the greatest hope of the new churches." This had been one of the main topics at the First Chinese Council which Bishop Versiglia took part in (15 May - 12 June 1924) and the problem that was constantly faced in the Apostolic Delegate's diary: Archbishop Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, Rome 1946.

## **A disturbed situation in the Lin-chow region. Visit to the North-east districts**

He had just arrived in Shiu-chow when hostilities broke out. General Chang Fat Kwai, having rebelled against Chiang Kai Shek, head of the anti-bolshevist Nationalist army,<sup>2</sup> was threatening Canton. The Nationalist Government, in order to strengthen the defence of Canton, was forced to withdraw regular troops controlling the Pak-kong valleys and keeping pirates and communist bands at bay. The areas now undefended were first the valleys to the north (Lok-chong, Yan-fà, Nam-yung),<sup>3</sup> and then Lin-chow.

Pirates took advantage of the situation to make up for the poor income of the previous months. Various groups besieged key points in the region of the Lin-chow river, extorting money from the inhabitants and everyone who passed through, imposing large bounties.

Having left Shiu-chow on 30 December, Michael's return to Lin-chow was an incredible adventure: an uninterrupted passing from the hands of one group of pirates to the next, all different except for one thing - all equally greedy. Only his admirable sangfroid, perfect knowledge of the language, customs and environment, his Chinese shrewdness, and skilled exploitation of the fact that he belonged to the Catholic Mission, helped the good confrere get out of trouble and lead him safe and sound to Lin-chow, naturally without a penny in his pocket and relieved of his luggage.<sup>4</sup>

Traffic on the Canton-Shiu-chow railway line was also suspended. Given the unsafe circumstances in the Lin-chow region, Bishop Versiglia decided to make a visit first to Chi-hing and Nam-yung, where, after the violence which culminated on 1<sup>st</sup> June with the capture of Fr Dalmasso, things had returned to relative calm.

Before leaving, he gave orders for the adaptation work to be carried out at Ho-sai, so that on his return the seminarians could be transferred there.

He left Shiu-chow toward the end of January, a little before the celebrations for the beginning of the Chinese New Year. It was the best time for finding the Christian communities free from concerns about work and more ready to welcome the bishop. The visit, which lasted until halfway through February, took place when the weather was already cold, the thermometer always below zero, but it was rich in apostolic fruits.<sup>5</sup>

## **Opening of the seminary at Ho-sai**

When the bishop was on his way back to Shiu-chow, the work to adapt the house at Ho-sai for the new seminary had not finished, but his presence sped things up. On Friday 21 February, 1930, he was able to tell his secretary, Fr Lareno, with some satisfaction:

“The most important part of the work is complete: tomorrow we can transfer the seminarians. The other work can be done later, bit by bit. This done, I will be free and on Monday the 24th I will leave for Lin-chow.”

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2 See Chapter 13 footnote 5.

3 See above in Chapter 21, the letter from Bishop Versiglia to Fr Rinaldi on 19 June 1929, in which he describes the situation in the North and North-east districts in June that year, and the capture of Fr Dalmasso.

4 Cf. *Inter Nos*, Anno X, no. 6, pp. 44-46. For the date of departure from Shiu-chow, cf. the postcard from Fr Caravario to Fr Francesco Ruffini from Lin-chow on 16 January 1930, Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Carav.

5 Cf. *Inter Nos*, Anno X, no. 3, pp. 20-23; no. 5 pp. 39-40; no. 6 pp. 41-42.

On the morning of Saturday 22 February, the 25 seminarians took their books, personal belongings and school desks and carried them down to the river bank where two boats took them all to their destination at Ho-sai.

In the evening, at 5 p.m., the bishop came for the opening and gave a nice address in the church, followed by Eucharistic benediction.

“This house is all yours and only for you” he said. “Your Superiors will draw up a Rule for you: observe it and you will happily reach port. This is the house of St Joseph; be devoted to him and he will assist you in your work.”

When they left the church the Bishop gave out sweets to everyone.

Fr Caravario was also present, having awaited the bishop there for some days to accompany him to his Mission at Lin-chow. As soon as he left the church he went up to cleric Benato and said to him, smiling:

“Lucky you, staying here to work in the garden of the Church!”

Who could have thought at that moment that a few days later, the Mission Council would decide to bury Fr Caravario’s body right there in front of the church where he had said those words, to be a watchman over the seminary!<sup>6</sup>

## Twelve years work

Chronologically speaking, the seminary was the last of Bishop Versiglia’s works, but the one closest to his heart because it ensured the future of the Mission.

On his arrival in 1918, he had found a simple residence at Shiu-chow, next to the New East Gate, and an old house at Ho-sai. In the districts there were 6 stations with a fixed residence for the missionary, 12 secondary stations and three small schools. There were 6 priests working in the Mission, and 1479 Christians. There was no social work or formation of missionary personnel, who were sent from Canton.

Now, Bishop Versiglia left behind in the Shiu-chow Vicariate:

1) Works: 15 primary stations with a fixed residence for the missionary; 40 secondary stations; 11 churches, 16 chapels; 23 schools with 800 pupils all up.<sup>7</sup>

Personnel: 19 foreign priests and 2 local ones; 1 foreign lay religious and 1 local one; 10 foreign Sisters and 15 local ones; 13 male catechists and 18 female catechists, 31 male teachers, 8 female teachers, 25 seminarians.

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6 B. Larena, *Assassinio di Mons. Versiglia e Don Caravario, Pro manuscripto*, Hong-kong 1933, p. 6; *Summ.* p. 11.

7 In italics the 15 primary stations; the others are the most considered among the 40 secondary ones:

*District of Shiu-chow: Shiu-chow, Ho-sai, Tcheung-shu-tam, Ma-pa.*

*District of Chi-hing: Chi-hing, Fong-tung, Tan-gnon.*

*District of Nam-yung: Li-hau-kiau, Kam-kong, Nam-yung, Tcheung-po-kiau, Yeung-mui-hang.*

*District of Yan-fa: Tong-tong, Kong-ke, Yan-fa, Tchong-fan, Fu-hang.*

*District of Lok-chong: Pak-heung, Tong-heung, Lok-chong, Pak-shan.*

*District of Ying-tak: Lin-kong-how, Ham-kwong, Ying-tak, Sui-pin, Tchiuwan, Miu-ha.*

*District of Yeung-shan: Ki-tam, Yi-to-sui, Yeung-shan, Tsing-lin.*

*District of Lin-chow: Lin-chow, Tung-pi, A-liu-tong, Wu-kong-tau, Tchu-kong.*

The primary stations, instead of being in the chief town of the district, are often in country towns because more suitable and less bothered by Bolshevik persecution.

Christians: 3,083.<sup>8</sup>

At the centre of the Mission, Shiu-chow, a substantial number of social works and works for the formation of missionary personnel:

The St Joseph's Orphanage at Ho-sai with church attached. The orphanage was opened in 1921. It then became a separate section apart from the Don Bosco Institute for lower classes, and finally a small seminary.

The house for formation of the female catechists at Ho-sai, which the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians took over when they arrived in China in 1923.

The Don Bosco Institute, opened in a solemn ceremony on 6 July 1924, and the nearby church of the Sacred Heart blessed by Bishop Versiglia and opened for worship on 1 November the same year. It functioned as a cathedral. The Institute had technical classes, supplementary ones and teachers courses. In 1929 the first teachers diplomas were awarded in addition to the technical diplomas.

The Institute of Mary Help of Christians with primary classes, secondary and teachers courses, opened in 1926. In 1929 they also had their first teachers receive diplomas.

The Shelter for the elderly, orphanage, a medical dispensary, opened in 1925 in the old residence at New East Gate. There was a branch of the clinic at Ho-sai. There was also an orphanage there.

During Bishop Versiglia's stay in Canada (1926-1927), the Bishop's House was built, and he called it the Missionary House.

At the beginning of 1929, a special school opened at Ho-sai for male catechists. Young men and married men prepared themselves there to be catechists in the mission residences.

They received a salary, both when they were pupils and when they were teaching, so they could always keep themselves and others they were looking after.<sup>9</sup>

### **The good shepherd's final goodbye**

On 23 February, on the eve of his departure, the luggage was ready, around twenty large packages with goods of all kinds: vestments, clothes and materials sent by the charity of benefactors in Italy and food needed for the journey which would last eight days.

In the days beforehand, Fr Caravario had seen to preparations and to anyone who worked miracles by God's grace he replied kindly:

“As long as everything does not go wrong!” Then he shrugged his shoulders as if to say: “At any rate, let the Lord's will be done.”

This was what he always said at important moments in his life.

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<sup>8</sup> *Inter Nos*, Anno XI, no. 2, November 1930, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Inter Nos*, Anno X, no. 4, March 1930, pp. 31-32; Supplement, no. 23, 30 October 1928; M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, pp. 151-157; *Summ.* pp. 171, 262, 302, 331, 358.

The boys at the Don Bosco Institute had asked that on his final day staying there, the Bishop would celebrate Mass for them. It was Sunday. The youngsters from the Institute and members of the Church at Shiu-chow gathered around their pastor, and many received Communion from his hands. At the end of the Mass, the Bishop gave a brief sermon. It was the final goodbye from the good shepherd to his sheep.

### **“I will follow you to China”**

At midday, at the dining table with his Salesian confreres, discussion turned to the visit that Fr Caravario, when still a young cleric, had made to Bishop Versiglia, who had come to Turin for the General Chapter in 1922. Some clerics had offered themselves to the Bishop, ready to follow him to the mission. Among them was the cleric Caravario, then an assistant at the St John the Evangelist College in Turin. The bishop promised he could, on condition that the Superiors would allow it. But the permission did not come ... indeed, given the scarcity of personnel in Italian provinces during the War and immediately after the War, not only was permission not given but such a move was forbidden.

Cleric Caravario went to see the bishop, and expressing his regret, he assured him again and again that he had decided to come to him in China as soon as the Superiors would allow him. The Bishop recalled the visit with pleasure and repeated the words literally he had heard from cleric Caravario:

“Yes, Bishop, you will see that I am a man of my word: I will follow you to China. You will certainly see me do so!”

When the young cleric made that promise he certainly did not have in mind the extent of significance his “I will follow you” would have; but the acceptance of martyrdom was always implicitly alive in the enthusiasm of his gift of self to God and the apostolic zeal that permeated all of his short life. As we have seen, the supreme sacrifice of himself became an open aspiration in the two years in Timor he called his “second novitiate” and in the end it was a clear prediction when he left Timor.

### **“Journey without end”**

In the afternoon, the bishop gave the usual sermon in the chapel at the Institute of Mary Help of Christians, and spoke about death, giving rise to some wonder at the choice of this topic, since it was the vigil of the monthly commemoration of Mary Help of Christians, and was also close to the celebrations for the beginning of the Chinese New Year. “Nothing follows us after death,” he said, not even our sins if they have been forgiven, but only our merits.” and he encouraged them to gain many of these.<sup>10</sup>

In the evening, after prayers, he gave the good night to pupils at the Don Bosco Institute. He went up to the chair overlooking the study, looking cheerful, and began to speak jokingly of a very long journey he was about to undertake, longer than if he were going to Nanking or Peking ... But none of the boys saw the joke or laughed. “We all had our eyes glued to him and could not look

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<sup>10</sup> Testimony of Sr Elena Bottini, *Summ.* p. 305.

away” some of them said.<sup>11</sup> He then reminded them that the following day was 24 May, a day dedicated to the Help of Christians, and recommended that they be devoted to Our Lady and be good.

Warm applause greeted his words. Then everyone, Superiors and boys, went to kiss his ring. He had a good word and some advice for each.

Those departing went to bed early that evening, because they needed to rise very early next morning.<sup>12</sup>

### **The farewell to those leaving**

Rising was really early, at four. The bishop still went to celebrate Mass in the chapel at the Institute of Mary Help of Christians, and celebrated it “with great devotion” the Sisters’ Superior said.<sup>13</sup>

Toward five thirty, the group gathered for departure. as well as Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario, two young teachers were part of the group. They had gained their diploma at the Don Bosco Institute, one of them still a pagan, Thong Chong Wai, around twenty years of age, already father of a family of two children; the other was a Christian, M Pan Ching Anthony, twenty three years old and married. Their two sisters were with them, Thong Su Lien Maria, twenty one years old, who had gained her teaching diploma at the Mary Help of Christians Institute, and M Yu Tce Paola, Anthony’s sister, sixteen years old, who was leaving her studies and going back to the family.<sup>14</sup> Maria was going back to the family for her farewell visit, intending to become a Sister with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.<sup>15</sup> There was also a young woman twenty two years old with them: Tzen Tz Yung Clara who was going to Lin-chow as a catechist, “To teach catechism to the women.”<sup>16</sup>

### **A moral duty of the missionaries**

“It was the custom at the Mission” Fr Braga says “to always accompany the boys and girls, female catechists and the personnel at the Mission in general, to protect them from possible attacks from pirates. For a good eight years I used do this for our pupils, saving them more than once by my presence. For four trips I had with me in the boat a good number of youngsters from our school, and in a separate section, a number of girls from the girls school and some of the female catechists. The latter group never dared travel alone, for fear of both the pirates and other passengers. With these precautions there were never problems: only once were the pupils and the missionary accompanying them robbed of their luggage.”<sup>17</sup>

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11 *Summ.* p. 173.

12 *Summ.* pp. 12–13.

13 *Summ.* p. 305.

14 *Summ.* p. 97.

15 *Summ.* p. 180.

16 *Summ.* p. 13. Thong (surname) Chong Wai (name),pronounced: Ton-Chion-vai. Thong Su Lien, pron.: Ton Su-lien. M (surname) Pan Ching, pronounced: M Pan-hcin. M Yu Tce, pronounced: M Yii-che (French u). The surname M is a nasal sound not reproducible in Italian; sometimes written as Ng. Tzen Tz Yung, pronounced: Tzen Tziiun. When baptised, the Christian name is added to the pagan one.

17 *Summ.* p. 159.

“The young boys and girls coming to the college or going back to their family were always accompanied by the missionaries. The people saw nothing bad in this, and in fact the parents insisted on it with the missionaries, before they let their girls leave.” This was said by Bishop Michele Arduino, who was a cleric at Shiu-chow at the time of Bishop Versiglia and then became his second successor in the Vicariate. “In this particular case,” he added “the two young teachers, their sisters and the catechist had waited to make the trip with the bishop and Fr Caravario and be protected by them.”<sup>18</sup>

### **By train. Stop-over at Ho-tow**

A good number of pupils from Don Bosco who came from the Lin-chow district wanted to accompany the group departing to the station and give them a final greeting to take back to their town. They mixed with them in cheerful conversation until those departing boarded the train. At 8:10 a.m. the train left. The women stood up and gave a deep bow. The Bishop and Fr Caravario responded, smiling at the warm goodbyes and waving handkerchiefs and caps until the train had left them all behind.

The group were due to arrive at Lin-kong-how at midday, where Fr Cavada was waiting for them. They were to stay there overnight and then pursue their journey along the Little Pak-kong or Lin-chow river. But the train coming from Canton had derailed, and traffic was paralysed, so they had to wait some hours at the station at Ho-tow. They arrived in Lin-kong-how at five that afternoon.

### **Disturbing questions**

While the train was stopped at Ho-tow and they were waiting for the line to be repaired, three soldiers approached the bishop. One began to speak and put some disturbing questions to him.

“Bishop, where are you going?” (Maria noted that he knew the correct title for a bishop, Chu Kao).

“To Lin-chow.”

The soldier offer the bishop some cigarettes; but the Bishop courteously declined.

“Thanks but I don’t smoke.”

“How come you don’t smoke? Are Christians not allowed to smoke?”

“Not, it is not that Christians are not allowed to smoke and many do, but I am not accustomed to smoking.”

“How many of you are going to Lin-chow?”

“We two, a catechist, a teacher, a pupil and two male teachers who are with our luggage looking after it.”

“What are you going to do at Lin-chow?”

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<sup>18</sup> *Summ.* p. 322.

“I am going to preach religion.”

“Bishop, are you not buying something to eat for your catechist, teacher and the two male teachers?”

“There is no need because we are getting off at Lin-kong-how where we will be eating.”

“You Europeans eat bread while we Chinese eat rice. Bread is more substantial than rice, so you have no need to eat so often; instead, rice is less substantial so we have to eat more frequently. Chinese from the north, however, eat bread; we also do so when we go to fight in the north. are all these bags yours? How come you have so much stuff?”<sup>19</sup>

“All these questions made me uncomfortable,” said Thong Maria, “until I made a sign to the bishop to put him on guard against these people. They finally left the carriage.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Old grudges??**

When the men had gone away the Bishop asked the girls:

“Do you know the man who spoke to me?”

“No, Bishop.”

“He is one of the men who, some years ago, wanted to commandeer the Don Bosco Institute to put his soldiers there; but I did not let him do it.” The bishop alluded to one of the two attempts at occupation we have narrated earlier (Chap. 19).

Once the line was back in service again, the train began moving and at five in the afternoon the group were welcomed by Fr Cavada at Lin-kong-how. Luggage was transported directly from the train to the boat, and once that was all organised they all went to the residence for supper. After supper the two male teachers went to spend the night in the boat to look after the luggage, while the Bishop and the others found lodging in the mission residence.

### **A Chinese boat is like a small house**

The Chinese boat is like a small house. Many poor Chinese in the regions with the great rivers become boatmen, and all they have to live in is their boat.

It has a flat hull. About half a metre above the bottom there is a floor made of small movable planks. In the centre, along the sides, are two fixed wooden walls, a little more than a metre high, surmounted by a barrel ceiling made of overlapping bamboo trellises. Among the trellises there is a layer of leaves, arranged like tiles on roofs, so that the water flows outside.

At the prow there is a third wall that closes off the two longitudinal ones, there is a doorway with two demountable doors. Parallel to this, at the stern, the wall completing the construction has another very low door allowing entrance to the small area set up as a kitchen.

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<sup>19</sup> *Summ.* pp. 200, 223, 224.

<sup>20</sup> *Summ.* p. 306.



## **How it is rowed**

Outside, around the boat, is a rim a little more than a span wide. In the smallest boats like the one used by Bishop Versiglia, this rim, essential for the larger boats, was missing. The boatmen, standing on this rim, have a long and sturdy bamboo pole fitted at the lower end with an iron shaft aimed firmly at the bottom of the river. At the other end is a semi-circular piece of wood grafted on perpendicularly and it fits over the shoulder perfectly. The boatmen, leaning their whole body over the pole, their feet firmly planted, push the boat forward. As the boat gradually moves forward they move back along the rim from prow to stern. This movement takes place at the same time on both sides of the boat. When they get to the stern, the boatmen run back to the prow, aim the pole at the bottom of the river once more and repeat the manoeuvre. To synchronise their efforts, they emit a lilted cry which echoes monotonously in the travellers' ears the whole day.

When there is not so much problem running against the current, there are only two pushing the boat along, while the other boatmen go ashore and pull it along with two bamboo ropes fixed to the boat's mast.

## **Seating for passengers**

Passengers on board can stay at the two ends of the boat, or in the little house which is of considerable size on the larger public boats in service. The uncovered back end (stern) is a kitchen. Generally there are no seats in the boat because the Chinese usually squat, or sit or stretch out on the floor. For special people, like Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario, use is made of the space below the floor, generally given over to luggage. The central planks near the door are removed from the floor, leaving some either side. By lowering oneself feet first down to the keel, one can sit comfortably along the planks running along the sides. Then at night, all the planks are put back and the boat's deck, always clean because the Chinese remove their shoes before getting on board, becomes a large bed.

In Bishop Versiglia's boat, the two side benches resulting from this special system were not very long, so Bishop Versiglia sat on one side and Fr Caravario on the other; All the others squatted on the deck. The male teachers, on the half day prior to the murders, were always outside in the stern.

## **On board the boat. Two new companions on the journey<sup>21</sup>**

Toward seven a.m. on Tuesday 25 February, after celebration of Mass, the party of missionaries went aboard the boat. The number had grown by two: a Christian boy, ten years old, Luk Apiao Peter, who was going to Lin-chow to study, and an elderly Christian woman going to Lin-chow as companion for the catechist Clara, who was still too young to manage her role alone. There were four boatmen: the owner of the boat, already fairly old, one of his sons who was seventeen years old and two servants who looked after navigation.

The travellers took their place on the boat: women at the back, toward the stern, men up front, toward the prow. The owner and the boatmen outside along the prow and stern.

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<sup>21</sup> The account of the martyrdom is drawn strictly from sources, always quoted, coordinating the testimonies of eye witnesses who complement one another. The spoken words are reproduced literally; narrative parts are drawn from sources literally or summarised from them.

Fr Cavada had wanted to join them to accompany the group as far as Ham-kwong, but the number of travellers was already too many for the small boat, so he remained at the residence.

A white drape fluttered from the boat with the words *Tin Tchu Tong* (Catholic Mission) written on it. It had always been used as a sign of safety and protection for those travelling.

Toward 9 a.m., as was their custom, the Chinese had a meal. Conversation aboard was lively until the bishop, who was tired of remaining seated, closed off inside the boat, decided to get some fresh air, and got off along the east bank of the river, with Fr Caravario and the two male teachers. The small group walked along the charming river bank while the boat slowly made its way up river drawn by two long ropes drawn by two of the boatmen. The bishop and Fr Caravario went ahead, conversing; behind them were the two teachers who were unable to say anything about the conversation because it took place in Italian.<sup>22</sup>

### **At Pak Ngan Hang on market day**

While they were talking, the missionaries came to a town called Pak Ngan Hang (silver stream).

It was market day. A group of men armed with rifle and revolver playing in a gambling den; others were wandering around here and there.

The teachers, Anthony and Chong Wai, said there were about a dozen people but they did not know if they were soldiers guarding the town or pirates.<sup>23</sup>

A missionary from the region assured us that they could only have been pirates, since the entire region was occupied by them and soldiers would not have dared enter those towns.

When the missionaries appeared, there was a look of wonder on the men's faces. Some, curious, left their gambling and came to watch the missionaries as they went by.

The bishop smiled and greeted them according to Chinese custom:

“Have you eaten rice?”

“Thank you, we have eaten” they replied courteously. “And you, have you eaten?”

“Thank you, but we have not eaten.”<sup>24</sup>

Asking Chinese if they have eaten rice corresponds to our conventional query: “How are you?”. In fact, if a Chinese does not eat rice ... it is a sign he is unwell!

The men exchanged a few words and some gestures of surprise between them while the missionaries, followed by the two teachers, continued walking.

After some time the bishop felt tired. It was already eleven and the two missionaries had not yet eaten. Besides, the path running alongside the river had become rather difficult. They all came aboard the boat once more. The bishop and Fr Caravario had their meal. The boatmen too took advantage of the opportunity for a snack and the boat stopped.

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<sup>22</sup> *Summ.* pp. 190, 193, 239–240, 244.

<sup>23</sup> *Summ.* pp. 190, 240.

<sup>24</sup> *Summ.* pp. 194, 195, 245.

## **Shots on the river bank**

The two teachers, standing at the prow, looked ahead about three kilometres further up, on the east shore, where there was the wedge formed by the Lin-chow river and the small stream flowing into it, the Sui-pin. They could see fires.<sup>25</sup>

When the boatmen had finished their brief snack, the ones pulling the boat along got back on land to pull. The two teachers followed them.

As they gradually came closer they could see the fires more clearly and around them about a dozen men lighting them.

“Who could have imagined” writes Thong Chong Wai “that those men warming themselves around the fire were feverish devils and venomous pirates?”<sup>26</sup>

At a certain point everyone got back on board the boat. The rope pullers, gathering up the ropes, gave a push with their long bamboo rods and with their powerful arms pushed the boat slowly upstream.

## **Li-tau-tsui**

It was midday. They said the Angelus on the boat. The teachers were in the prow with the boatmen. The bishop was sitting on the long bench along the right-hand side, and with his head resting on the side, was dozing.

Opposite the bishop, on the other bench, Fr Caravario was saying his Divine Office; further on toward the back of the boat, were the women and young Apiao.<sup>27</sup>

The boat, being pushed ahead by strong arms had slowly come opposite the wedge of land formed by the confluence of the Sui-pin stream and the Lin-chow river, where the teachers had seen the fires. Inhabitants of the district called this the Li-tau-tsui because of its shape: the ploughshare.<sup>28</sup>

It had a small grassy verge, then a bamboo thicket; further back some rice paddies and in the middle of them, toward the Lin-chow river, a small group of houses called Phai Fung Wan; then forests again and mountains. The land and the group of houses were under the jurisdiction of Sui-pin about a dozen kilometres away along the stream it took its name from.

## **“Stop the boat!”**

Suddenly, they heard an imperious command:

“Stop the boat!”

The boatmen looked toward the strip of land where the fires were and saw a dozen or so armed men pointing their rifles and revolvers at the boat.

“Who are you taking?” they shouted from the shore.

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<sup>25</sup> *Summ.* pp.190, 195, 240.

<sup>26</sup> *Summ.* p. 240.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Summ.* p. 219.

<sup>28</sup> For the significance, see above in Chap. 11, p. 177 no. 69. Cf. *Summ.* pp. 194–195, 201, 240.

“We are taking the Bishop and a Father from the Catholic Mission, going to Lin-chow to preach religion.

“Where are you coming from?”

“From Lin-kong-how.”

“Come ashore!”

“They are people from the Catholic Mission and they do not need to come ashore.”

“Come ashore just the same!”<sup>29</sup>

The women, listening to this exchange, fully understood what it was about, and taking their rosaries, they put their face on their knees, covered their heads with their hands and prayed.

Fr Caravario was worried. The bishop, unaware of what was awaiting him, but no novice to what happens, gathered his strength to maintain the *sangfroid*, and calm so needed in such circumstances.

### **“Under whose protection are you travelling?”**

Given the precise command and the threatening attitude of the pirates pointing their rifles at the boat, the boatmen took up their long poles and hastened to land the boat on the shore.

“Under whose protection are you travelling?” they asked arrogantly.

“Nobody’s”

“What do you mean ‘nobody’s’? Why did you not let us know beforehand?” Then, turning to the owner of the boat:

“You, boatman, how dare you take people to Lin-chow without first asking for our protection ... You are not going to be allowed to pass without immediately giving us five hundred dollars in European banknotes for our food rations; otherwise we will shoot the lot of you.”<sup>30</sup>

### **The transit fee**

We need to note that all traffic on the Lin-chow river in certain periods when the Canton government had reduced the number of defensive military contingents, was under the forced jurisdiction of the pirates. This was the kind of slavery the Chinese were subjected to when they could do nothing about it. There were certain places where the different pirate chiefs would, upon payment, give a statement of protection. Every boat that set out on a voyage was supposed to carry one.

However, the missionaries, as foreigners, had a right to ignore these clandestine customs officials, and in fact had always travelled without any such declaration. If the boat was paid for by the missionary for its trip, it carried a banner with *Tin Tchu Tong* (Catholic Mission) written on it, as was the case for this group of ours. If the missionary was travelling in the public service common

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29 *Summ.* pp. 194–195, 219, 240–241.

30 *Summ.* pp. 194–195, 241.

boats, he was personally exempt from any bother of the kind, as had been the case twenty days earlier when Fr Caravario came to Shiu-chow to accompany the bishop.

The boatmen in question had made this trip on many other occasions carrying people from the Mission, and he had never had any difficulty. But that time he had to confess that he had stumbled across thieves “so bad that they were the worst I had ever seen.”<sup>31</sup>

Also the boatman’s mother, who was there watching the whole scene of their capture, when she testified at the Shiu-chow process, which she did at Lin-chow, said: “I have never seen pirates take Europeans prisoner, Only Chinese. The pirates took them prisoner only because they wanted money.”<sup>32</sup>

The request for money, as would result from the turn of events, was none other than a pretext to begin to carry out a premeditated plan whose primary objective was the girls, and more specifically Su Lien Maria. The intransigent opposition of the missionaries and the Bolshevist hatred of some of the assailants led to the murders. The pirates expressly refused the money but not the girls, and vented their hatred for religion and the missionaries. Had they only wanted money they knew the procedure to follow very well.

### **Pirate procedure**

When pirates assail passengers to take their money, they don’t pretend to ask them to stand and deliver huge sums, because they know all too well that in China no one carries more than what is strictly necessary for himself on a journey, precisely because of the danger of being robbed. The pirates could easily have imagined that the missionaries would not have had five hundred dollars with them. But had they wanted this, they knew very well how they could get it: detain the prisoners and write to Shiu-chow asking for the desired sum as a ransom.

It is usual to ask for four times the amount they want in fact; so in our case, two thousand dollars. The interested party (in our case the Provicar), would have had to negotiate with the pirates by means of their representatives in Shiu-chow, offering, for example, two hundred dollars, and involving them in negotiations which sometimes could last months until the desired sum was reached. It would be paid in advance at the office where the pirates had their representative. He would pass on the information to the pirates who would then free the prisoners.

Sometimes the interested party is too reluctant or too slow in coming to an agreement. Then the pirates cut off a prisoner’s ear or finger and send these to whoever is making the payment, inviting them to hurry up and pay, and threatening to kill the prisoner. If the money still does not come, the pirates cut off the other ear or a second finger and send them with an even stronger statement of intent, saying it is the final warning. It sometimes happens that the poor individual (generally the nearest relative) does not have the money asked for and then the prisoner is killed. This happens very rarely, though, because the pirates know all too well what the victim’s financial capacity is and generally speaking do not impose an impossible amount.

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31 B. Lareno, *Assassinio di Mons. Luigi Versiglia e Don Callisto Caravario*, Historical documentation, *Pro manuscripto*, Hong-kong 1933, p. 104.

32 *Summ.* p. 72.

### **“Tell the ‘foreign devils’ to come out”**

The bishop was still pretending to doze, and Fr Caravario, fearing he was asleep and was unaware of what was happening around them, shook him, quite concerned:

“Bishop, Bishop, the pirates are asking for a fee of five hundred dollars for their rations!”

The bishop continued to show that he was calm and not too concerned.

“Tell the ‘foreign devils’ to come out; tell the men from the Catholic Mission to come outside!”  
The boatmen went to the door and said:

“There are pirates. They are asking for five hundred dollars for their provisions and they want you to come and speak to them.”

“Don’t go! Don’t go!” the girls whispered.

Fr Caravario thought it was his job to intervene. He pulled out his visiting card, got up from his seat, went to the prow and in perfect Chinese manners, handed over the card. He bowed and went back to sit down.

One of the pirates took the visiting card, read it and insisted:

“The ‘foreign devils’ must give us five hundred dollars for our rations.”

“Bishop,” Fr Caravario repeated “the pirates want five hundred dollars for their provisions.”

“Tell them we are missionaries and therefore we do not have that much money with us.”<sup>33</sup>

### **“We are missionaries and therefore we do not have that much money with us”**

The pirates, annoyed at the reluctance to respond to their requests, began to hurl insults and abuse against the missionaries.<sup>34</sup>

Fr Caravario appeared at the door on the boat, followed by the bishop.

“Their faces were smiling,” the survivors said “they looked calm, and they were kindly and proper in their manners, their words full of meekness and kindness.”<sup>35</sup>

“We are missionaries” said the bishop. “It is our custom not to carry as much money with us as you are asking for but only what we need for our sustenance.

“Ah! They do not want to bring their money out . . . Come on, burn their boat! Burn their boat!”

“Kind sirs, we cannot give you what you are asking for because we do not have it.”

“You are Europeans and for sure you have money and if you do not hand it over we will burn the boat.”

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33 *Summ.* pp. 23, 194-195-196, 219. Bishop Versiglia’s secretary, Fr Larena, calculates that the Bishop had around thirty dollars with him (*Summ.* p. 14). The pirate captured and questioned by the judge in Ying-tak on the evening of 2 March 1930, says he took “more than fifty silver dollars.” Fr Larena had given the Bishop an imprecise amount in silver dollars.

34 *Summ.* p. 198.

35 *Summ.* pp. 190, 232, 234.

The bishop said in a loud voice, “They do not believe that we do not have money and it is impossible to convince them.”<sup>36</sup>

“Let’s carry away their wives!”

At this point some of the pirates jumped on the boat and cried out:

“Let us kill the two ‘foreign devils’!. They explored the boat and saw the girls.”<sup>37</sup>

“Let’s carry away their wives,” they shouted “carry away their wives!”

“No, they are not our wives” Fr Caravario explained. “They are our pupils and you should not touch them.”

“If you have no money we will take your wives away and if you oppose us we will bash you. You women, come out, come onto the land!”<sup>38</sup>

### **“Why do you want to kidnap our pupils so violently?”**

On land, they fired off some shots by way of intimidation. The bishop and Fr Caravario, hearing the threat to kidnap the girls, went back to the boat and sat down near the entrance to give the robbers a chance to rethink their terrible suggestions, but ready to defend the girls with their own person if they dared to come on board the boat.

The pirates, urged on by passion and resolved to carry out their proposal, launched themselves toward their prey.

“No, Don’t take the girls!” the bishop and Fr Caravario begged, again trying to change the evil doers by their kind approach. “They are our pupils. No, not like that ... we have not offended you in any way. Do not be so evil! We have not offended you; so why, for no reason at all, do you want to kidnap our pupils so violently?”<sup>39</sup>

Pressing them with their kindly approach and with please, the two missionaries managed to keep the evildoers off the boat and block off the entrance with their bodies.<sup>40</sup>

### **“Let’s set fire to the boat!”**

Wanting to dislodge them at any cost, the pirates once again threatened to burn the boat.

“Let’s set fire to the boat, let’s set fire to the boat!” they cried.

A few metres further along, a boat full of wood had stopped. There were six or seven men on the boat having a small midday snack. Some of the pirates jumped up, loaded some wood on their

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36 *Summ.* pp. 23–24, 190, 192, 194, 196, 201, 219, 232, 234, 241.

37 This comes from Chong Wai (*Summ.* p. 246) and leaves us to understand that the pirates were sure there were people they wanted to rape.

38 *Summ.* pp. 195–196, 246. as would appear following this, the alternative money or your wives is false. The money is only a pretext. The two missionaries understand immediately that it was not a question of an alternative, and took up a defensive position regarding the girls. Later they themselves offered money as an alternative but the offer was rejected.

39 *Summ.* pp. 196, 241, 246.

40 *Summ.* pp. 198, 246.

shoulders and, stacking them up on the prow of the missionaries' boat, tried to set fire to it; but the wood was big and green and the bishop managed to put out the fire.<sup>41</sup>

## **Beating**

The pirates, who were becoming increasingly embittered, undid the bundles of wood, and some with stick, others with their rifle butt, struck the missionaries on their arms as they held them out in defence, on their chests and shoulders, trying to clear the way to get on the boat.<sup>42</sup>

But the missionaries resisted the blows and did not abandon their defensive position, saying they were even ready to die to defend their pupils.<sup>43</sup>

On the boat the girls were crying and praying aloud.

“The pirates looked like men,” Chong Wai wrote to her father “but their hearts were like wild animals.”<sup>44</sup>

How long did the beatings last? Chong Wai says more than half an hour. <sup>45</sup>Antonio said the same.<sup>46</sup>

Suddenly two of the pirates, jumping up on the prow, inflamed with anger, fired a revolver and rifle at the missionaries. But the bullet from the revolver missed its target, and the shot from the rifle was misdirected by another pirate who acted in time to push the barrel away so the bullet hit the side of the boat; he immediately rebuked his mate:

“Don't shoot like that! There are many of us here and you might hit someone you don't want to hit!”<sup>47</sup>

## **“Almost beaten to death”**

The two missionaries were covered in bruises and exhausted from their beating.

“At this point,” an eyewitness tells us, Antonio the teacher, “the Bishop and Fr Caravario were almost beaten to death and had no strength left to continue resisting.”<sup>48</sup>

The bishop's face was pale; his normally keen and penetrating eyes were dim ... and he was fading. His body covered the catechist, Clara who was lying on the ground, begging and praying.

“The bishop had fallen over me” she tells us “and the pirates were beating him so brutally that I could feel the blows from underneath.”<sup>49</sup>

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41 *Summ.* pp. 190, 192, 196, 201, 212, 235, 241, 246.

42 *Summ.* pp. 191-192, 196, 201-202, 213, 233, 235, 241, 246, 248, 252-253.

43 *Summ.* pp. 25, 109, 221.

44 *Summ.* p. 234.

45 *Summ.* pp. 235, 242, 246.

46 *Summ.* p. 192.

47 *Summ.* pp. 246-247.

48 *Summ.* p. 193.

49 *Summ.* p. 26.



Fr Caravario, stronger because he was younger, continued to resist continua a resist ... but finally exhausted, he was slumped on the left side bench of the boat, while his colourless lips were murmuring the names 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph'.<sup>50</sup>

At the sight of the two victims falling beneath their blows, their ferocious assailants were disconcerted for a moment then they ordered the other pirates on shore:

"What are you doing down there? The two 'foreign devils' have fallen. Quick, take the women away!"<sup>51</sup>

### **Filthy hands**

The girls understood that it was all over for them.

One of the miscreants who had come onto the boat from the opening at the stern, came up to Maria and in an insinuating manner took her 'gently' for a kiss and invited her to come down. The girl, rejecting his filthy hands with horror, grabbed hold of the bishop even more strongly.<sup>52</sup>

"With all my strength," she writes "I grabbed hold of the bishop's left arm."<sup>53</sup>

He had revived for an instant and desperately held her arms to protect her and stop them taking her away.

"The bishop held on to me so desperately," the catechist Clara tells us "that still today, a few days later, I carry the bruise from him grabbing so tightly."<sup>54</sup> "But the robbers hit his hands with a piece of wood," Clara continues "and so managed to pull me away from him and carry me away."»<sup>55</sup>

The bishop, his voice weak from exhaustion, begged:

"Do not be so evil! What do you want? You do not need to be so cruel! ..."

Humiliated by this rebuff, the miscreant grabbed Maria violently by the arm and dragged her forcefully off the boat at the stern, while she tearfully cried out in a loud voice: "Lord, save me! Mary Help of Christians pray for me! Jesus, Mary, Joseph ..."

Dragging her to the stern the men tried to tie her up but she protested saying it was not necessary. The pirates let her go and she stood up. At that instant her eyes met the eyes of the Bishop:

"Increase your faith! Increase your faith!" the good pastor suggested to her.<sup>56</sup>

### **I would rather die!**

Maria, seeing she was free for a moment, threw herself into the river, ready to die rather than fall into the hands of her filthy aggressors. But the water was not very deep and the men succeeded in

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50 *Summ.* pp. 193, 196, 198, 233, 235, 241.

51 *Summ.* p. 196.

52 *Summ.* pp. 201, 213, 219, 307.

53 *Summ.* pp. 201, 213.

54 *Summ.* pp. 26, 56, 99.

55 *Summ.* p. 111.

56 *Summ.* pp. 202, 212, 213, 220.

grabbing her by the hair and the arms and carrying her to the bank, where they reached Clara and Paola who were being dragged by other pirates.<sup>57</sup>

“You are Chinese, so why do you want to follow foreigners and die?” one of the robbers asked her. “If our leader, Chang Fat Kwai, can get rid of Chiang Kai Shek, you women would have no more books to study.<sup>58</sup> You would go around nude like the women in Han-kow did. We need to destroy the Catholic religion! Now, be good and follow us, otherwise we will kill you.”<sup>59</sup>

### **“You should not pray to God but to me”**

Disturbed by these threats, Maria knelt down and prayed. “One of the thieves, seeing her on her knees” her brother Chong Wai tells us “believing she wanted to beg for clemency this way, rebuked her harshly:

‘You don’t need to kneel down, because we will drag you along with us just the same.’

‘I am not knelling down before you, you wicked people,’ the girl answered indignantly ‘but before God, my great Father, who certainly will know how to free me from your violence.

‘You should not pray to God but to me” the pirate said. “You should recommend yourself to me, not to God.”<sup>60</sup>

Thong Chong Wai, writing the same day from Lin-kong-how to her father, says:

“Thieves of this kind certainly had their mandate from the rebel Chang Fat Kwai. You could work that out from what they were saying.”<sup>61</sup>

### **“The two foreigners – come ashore!”**

“The two foreigners – come ashore!” one threatening voice cried.

Fr Caravario got up and obeyed; but the Bishop did not move.

The pirates understood that he had no strength left and ordered Antonio to go back to the boat and help the bishop.

He appeared shortly afterwards, staggering, and came ashore leaning on Antonio.

“These three girls have a father and a mother,” Fr Caravario begged in vain, “so I beg you not to take them away!”

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57 *Summ.* pp. 197, 202, 213, 220.

58 For Communism in China see above, Chaps 13, 16, 19, 20. Chang Fat Kwai is a well-known Southern General, implicated in the Communist uprising in Canton in 1927. At the head of an army called “Iron ribs”, he rebelled against the central government in Nanching, both in 1929, and later ( See above, Chap. 19, no. 5). Chiang Kai Shek was then president of the national government in Nanching.

59 *Summ.* pp. 242, 245, 247.

60 *Summ.* pp. 242, 245.

61 First letter of Thong Chong Wai to her father, on 25 February 1930; *Summ.* p. 226. That the order came from on high is quite improbably. But “from what they were saying” Chong Wai argues that they were Communists and confirms it in a letter to her father on 4 March 1930 (*Summ.* p. 229). The documents speak of three soldiers missing from Chang Fat Kwai’s army, two of whom carried out the shooting of the missionaries by order of their chief, Chin Afuk (*Summ.* p. 70). One of the pirates, probably one of the three former Communist soldiers, was the Communist activist who came up against Maria Thong Su Lien at Shiu-chow and who recognised her during their capture and took up the debate with her again there (*Summ.* p. 224).

“Who is that?” one of the pirates asked Fr Caravario, pointing to Chong Wai.

“He is Thong Chong Wai, the younger brother of Thong Su Lien (Maria)” Fr Caravario replied.

“And that one?”

“That is M Phan Ching (Antonio), older brother of Yu Tce (Paola).”<sup>62</sup>

### **Searched and tied up**

The pirates rummaged in the pockets of the two missionaries: they took Fr Caravario’s watch and money, and the Bishop’s watch, leaving his ring and pectoral cross.

The pirates got the boatman to give them two ropes and they tied up the bishop and Fr Caravario.

They wrapped the rope around an arm twice and then running it tightly behind their backs, tied it to the other arm; the length that was left over was then knotted around the part that stretched behind their backs. This is how the Chinese tie someone up who is going to be shot.

The two missionaries had their arms tied, but their forearms and hands were free, so they could have tried to escape. But the pirates had tied a strip of bamboo to the part of the rope that ran behind the two prisoners’ backs then tied these two strips together in such a way that it would have been impossible for them to run away, tied together like that, through the thick clump of trees.<sup>63</sup>

Before you reached the trees there was a grassy patch in the form of a triangle. The girls were held on the left side along the Sui-pin river. Opposite them, a short way away on the Lin-chow river side, were the two missionaries. Everyone was silent, caught up in sorrow and bewilderment.

### **“We absolutely have to kill them!”**

“We must absolutely kill these two foreigners!” cried one of the pirates. “We should not fear that they will visit some foreign evil on us or Chinese soldiers to punish us. We can deal with those. We are as strong as them.” Then turning to the two missionaries he asked:

“Are you not afraid to die?”

“We are missionaries,” the bishop replied “so why should we be afraid to die?”<sup>64</sup>

Two of the pirates took the missionaries by the arms and led them into the nearby thicket of bamboo.<sup>65</sup>

Others, under threat from rifles, forced the two teachers and boatman and his two servants to unload the luggage and put it on the riverbank.<sup>66</sup>

One of the pirates, who would have been the leader, and was holding the revolver, commanded:

“Anything with ‘Catholic Mission’ on it, put it on one side and see that it is not taken away.”<sup>67</sup>

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62 *Summ.* pp. 109, 195, 197.

63 *Summ.* pp. 193, 197, 202, 213, 220.

64 *Summ.* p. 191.

65 *Summ.* p. 243.

66 *Summ.* p. 248.

67 *Summ.* p. 243.

One of the pirates took some books from a box, and holding it up and waving it around shouted:

“These are study books. If Chang Fat Kwai conquers Chiang Kai Shek, there will be no more study!”<sup>68</sup>

## **Pillage**

All the luggage was brought ashore and opened. “Books, vestments that the Bishop and fathers use for celebrating Mass were all burnt. What was not easy to burn or was too heavy to carry was thrown into the river; the rest was loot for the pirates” Antonio and Chong Wai attest.<sup>69</sup>

The pirates ordered the two teachers to help them carry away the loot. Forced to, they obeyed but very slowly and unwillingly.

“The thieves were in a rush to carry stuff away,” little Apiao told Fr Lorenzo twenty days later “while the two teachers were going very slowly and holding back. That’s why the thieves sent them away.”<sup>70</sup>

## **The boat returns**

The boat was empty. The owner asked for permission to go on as far as Ham-kwong, but the pirates told him to return to Lin-kong-how. The boat moved off quickly, following the river current and carrying with it the boatmen and the old woman who was supposed to accompany the catechist Clara to Lin-chow, and little Apiao, who knew how to get out of trouble by saying he was the boatman’s son.<sup>71</sup>,

The pirates, once they were certain that the two teachers were brothers of Maria and Paola respectively, set them free.<sup>72</sup>

“One of them pointed his rifle at us” Antonio tells us. “Seeing this, we quickly forded the small Sui-pin stream and ran after the boat which was not very far ahead.”<sup>73</sup>

At five o’clock they arrived in Lin-kong-how to bring the sad news to Fr Cavada.

## **“Go and collect your clothes”**

The three young girls were also subjected to a brief interrogation, after which the pirates concluded as a way of calming them down:

“We are thinking of freeing you and letting you return home; so do not be afraid! Go and collect your clothes.”<sup>74</sup> Maria’s clothes were all wet from the water.

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68 *Summ.* p. 197.

69 *Summ.* pp.193, 235, 243.

70 *Summ.* p. 94.

71 *Summ.* p. 93.

72 *Summ.* p. 247.

73 *Summ.* pp. 197–198, 243.

74 *Summ.* pp. 109, 111.

“I was then determined I would die,” Maria writes, understanding that the pirates’ words were not sincere “because this seemed to me to be the only way to save my virginity. This is why I threw myself into the water; but those evil men had rescued me against my will.

“Given my firm decision, it seemed to be of no use at all to go and collect my clothes, and I did not want to obey. But the pirates, in a fury, threatened us and hurled such abuse at us that we did not think it appropriate to resist any further, and slowly we set off to where our suitcases were.

“We took some clothes with us which we then abandoned once more. Among the suitcases and baskets I saw two crucifixes, and although I did not know whose they were, I did not hesitate to pick them up: they were the only things I brought with me.”<sup>75</sup>

### **The martyrs’ last confession**

“Afterwards we went and sat in the bamboo thicket with the Bishop and Fr Caravario” Maria goes on to say. “We were about three metres away from them. I saw that Fr Caravario, his head bowed, was speaking softly to the bishop.”

The three survivors believe that at this point the two missionaries were hearing each other’s confessions.

“I often looked at the bishop” Maria says once more “and I noted that his face constantly had the aspect of a man filled with peace and grace. His head held high and his eyes looking up to heaven, he infused hope in me that we would get away and that God would have saved my virginity.”<sup>76</sup>

### **“Why do you love these crucifixes so much?”**

The catechist Clara writes in her report:

“The Bishop and Fr Caravario were looking at us, getting us to look up to heaven with their eyes, and they were praying. They had a calm and smiling aspect and they were praying aloud. Holding our rosary beads in our hands, we were praying. The pirates asked us:

‘What are these things?’

‘They are rosaries’ we replied.

“The pirates then immediately took them out of our hands and looked at them.

“I brought the crucifixes to my lips and kissed them” Mary goes on to say. “But one of the pirates, as soon as he saw me, came up to me and took the crucifixes from my hands, cursing me in these words:

‘Why do you love these crucifixes so much? ... Don’t you know that we are desperately unhappy with him, are against him, hate him with all our heart and absolutely don’t want him?’

“And so saying he grabbed the two crucifixes and through them away with contempt.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Summ.* pp. 202, 210, 213-214.

<sup>76</sup> *Summ.* p. 202-203, 210, 214, 220.

<sup>77</sup> *Summ.* pp. 210-211, 214, 221.

### **“Let’s hurry up and kill them because they are men of the religion of ‘foreign devils’”**

“Not long after,” Maria continues “the pirates wanted us to go further into the bamboo thicket.”<sup>78</sup>

The Bishop and Fr Caravario were praying in a loud voice. The girls believed they were saying the litanies.

“Those two foreigners are casting spells!” the pirates commented. “We absolutely have to kill them.”<sup>79</sup>

They arrived at a small stream and the pirates asked the Bishop and Fr Caravario:

“Well, do you want to die or not?”

“We do not want to die, because you will carry away our pupils” the Bishop replied.

“How come?” one of the pirates said. “Before you said that you were happy to die and now you no longer want to? You need to die! Let’s hurry up and kill them because they are men of the religion of ‘foreign devils’. This is why they do not want to die.”<sup>80</sup>

### **“We do not want money”**

“Sir, how much money do you want?” asked Fr Caravario. “We are from the Catholic Mission at Shiu-chow. We do not want you to take our pupils away. If you want money, the Father will write to Shiu-chow and you can have what you want.”

“We don’t want money, we want to kill foreigners because if we let them go alive they will take revenge.”<sup>81</sup>

After having tried all ways to save the girls, and seeing that these wild animals could only be satisfied with blood, the two heroic missionaries generously offered their blood. It would be fruitful dew on the young shoot of the Salesian Work at Kwang-tung.

At a sign from the pirates, the missionaries retook the small path in the middle of the thicket.

### **“We wanted to die with the missionaries”**

“We wanted to follow the Bishop,” the catechist Clara writes “but the pirates did not allow us to and hurled abuse at us in a loud voice:

‘Go away, why do you want to follow them?’

‘We want to follow the Bishop to die with him and go to heaven with him.’

‘You want to die; but we really can’t kill you.’<sup>82</sup>

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78 *Summ.* p. 214.

79 *Summ.* p. 109.

80 *Summ.* pp. 105, 109, 110, 112, 203, 211, 214, 221.

81 *Summ.* pp. 105, 110, 112, 203, 211, 214, 221, 366, 375, 407, 410.

82 *Summ.* p. 110.

“Then we had a very great desire in our hearts to die with the missionaries” writes teacher Maria Thong. “So, disregarding our lives, we propelled ourselves toward the Bishop. But how could we do it? ... The pirates were many, and planting themselves in front of us they barred the way and stopped us from moving. We remained there, petrified with sorrow.”<sup>83</sup>

### **They knelt down and were absorbed in God**

About a hundred metres after the small stream, where the missionaries were separated from the girls a path went off to the right leading directly to the farmhouses at Phai Fung Wan, that could be seen a short distance away amid some fields sown with rice. The other path instead went straight ahead through the thicket and led to Sui-pin, following the stream from which the district takes its name.

The missionaries continued along this path, accompanied by just two pirates, two former Communist soldiers, given the task of the execution by the leader Chin Afuk.<sup>84</sup>

Following them were some curious inhabitants from the nearby farmhouses, and the pirates held them back some distance from the place where the firing squad would be, but not so far that one shopkeeper could not hear one final plea from the bishop, who said:

“I am old, kill me by all means! But he is young: spare him!”<sup>85</sup>

Receiving a negative response, the two martyrs, bound together, knelt down, turned their faces to heaven and remained absorbed in God.

### **“We heard five shots from a rifle”**

Maria Thong’s report continues: “The pirates then made us turn back till we came to a small white pagoda and we sat down just before it.”<sup>86</sup> Not long later we heard five shots from a rifle ring out.

“At these detonations we threw ourselves to the ground on our knees and begged the cruel pirates:

‘Sirs, since you do not want to kill us let us immediately go back to our homes.’

“At these words the pirates hurled abuse against us in a loud voice saying:

‘Why do you want to follow the foreigners and believe in their religion? I believe you are still wearing crucifixes, since you have entered the religion of the “foreign devils”. Well then, take them off immediately, and in a hurry and give them to us so we can throw them away.’<sup>87</sup>

### **”We will destroy all religions”**

“I then replied:

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83 *Summ.* p. 214.

84 *Summ.* p. 70.

85 *Summ.* pp. 36-37.

86 They came back no longer along the track running beside the Sui-pin rivulet, but moved to the other side of the triangular tongue of land (the shaft of the plough), the side running along the Lin-chow river. The small pagoda stands alongside the Lin-chow River about 150 metres from where the boat came ashore. See map and photograph.

87 *Summ.* pp. 203, 211, 221.

“The crucifix I am wearing was given to me by my father and mother and its only purpose is to protect me. It has nothing to do with you; so there is no need for you to worry about it!

‘If Chiang Kai Shek is beaten,’ the pirate said ‘our boss and leader Chang Fat Kwai will certainly rule for a long time! When this time comes we will destroy all “foreign devils” and all their religions without any distinction.’

“That said, he raised an arm and shaking it he shouted in a loud voice:

‘Down with Chiang Kai Shek! Long live Chang Fat Kwai! Long live the Soviet!’”<sup>88</sup>

### **“Give a dollar to someone to bury them”**

“About ten minutes later,” Maria the teacher says, “the pirates who had carried out the execution returned and confirmed that they had fired five shots from a rifle. They said that first they had shot one of them and he had fallen without the other not even watching; they then killed the second one.”<sup>89</sup>

The first to fall was certainly the leader, the bishop, and the one not even looking was Fr Caravario who, as the survivors testify, was absorbed in offering up his sacrifice after his long conversation with the Bishop.

“At the advice of one of the pirates,” Maria’s report continues “the two executioners returned to see if the missionaries were really dead. While they were heading off, one of their companions said:

‘Give someone from the town a dollar to bury them.’”<sup>90</sup>

The corpses were found with their skulls fractured.

Fr Caravario also had his left cheekbone broken.

It was probably on their return that they hit him there with the butt of the rifle and took the Bishop’s ring and pectoral cross.

### **“They died happy, and these girls also want to die”**

“These things can’t be explained!” noted the pirates remaining with the three girls in front of the white pagoda. We have seen so many . . . and they all fear death. Instead these ones are quite the opposite: two died happy and these girls only want to die. Then turning to them:

‘You, why did you join the religion of foreigners and not ours? We are Chinese, we have a religion of idols; you are also Chinese and therefore you should adore them. So, you young girls, how come you have married such old foreigners?’

‘We have not married foreigners, we are their pupils.’

“The pirates then expressed deep hatred for the two foreigners and said:

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88 *Summ.* pp. 204, 211, 215.

89 *Summ.* pp. 221-222.

90 *Summ.* p. 222.



‘Since they opposed our taking the girls they hurt us so deeply in our hearts that we just had to kill them.’”<sup>91</sup>

### **Relic of Don Bosco**

The pirate who had taken the crucifixes from Maria, rummaging around in the baskets had found two relics of Don Bosco. Fr Caravario had been given them by the Salesian Provincial, Fr Canazei, who had brought them from Turin where he had been for the Beatification celebrations. Not knowing what they were, the pirate gave them to the girls asking for an explanation. They took them and carried them with them. They then said that the relics were their hope for when they were in prison.<sup>92</sup>

### **“The pirates took them to their homes”**

Maria Thong, the teacher, once again writes in her report:

“We stayed for a while in front of the small white pagoda. Then after walking a few ly<sup>93</sup>, we reached the top of a hill where we sat down to rest.

“We stayed on this hill until the sun went down, then the pirates, risking a walk with torches, took us to their homes. The paths we traversed were steep and craggy and we walked with difficulty, often tripping and falling.

“Along the way we thought about throwing ourselves into the water and dying; but no such opportunity presented itself. We also had in mind to run away without them knowing; but we were dissuaded from that idea because we did not know any of the paths and in fact had no idea where we were. Dejected, meanwhile all we could do was pray ardently to the Lord and his Blessed Mother to protect us and save us.

“We reached a small wooded area where there was a small town surrounded by bamboo bushes. Here, the pirates prepared supper and ate. We were put in a small room where we continued to weep and pray. When the pirates had had enough they came to give us the order to get moving again.

“After a short walk we reached a second wooded area where there was another little hamlet, also surrounded by bamboo bushes and with a small town square. We stayed there a long time then continued on to a third town where we stayed for the next three days.”<sup>94</sup>

On the first night, late, the leaders drew lots for the three girls, forcefully separated them and forced them to be their concubines.<sup>95</sup>

“In the three days we spent in this town,” Maria writes, “an elderly lady looked after us. She tried to distract us and console us. But our hearts were in a sea of sorrow. We touched no food for all that time, and using shards of crockery and sticks, we tortured our bodies to ask the Virgin Mary to set us free.”<sup>96</sup>

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91 *Summ.* pp. 110, 222.

92 *Summ.* pp. 36, 110, 203.

93 The ly is a Chinese measurement, 665 metres.

94 *Summ.* pp. 204-205, 215-217.

95 *Summ.* pp. 58-59, 107, 108, 109, 205.

96 *Summ.* p. 217.

## **“I recognise you!”**

The girls had an opportunity to speak with one of their captors.

“I recognise you” one of them told the teacher, Maria. “I remember very well that when I was a soldier at Shiu-chow, you came out with a team of students from the Institute. You discussed Sun Yat Sen’s *San Min Ciu* with me.<sup>97</sup> Well, Sun Yat Sen is a Bolshevist.”

“But in his seventh paragraph he says that everyone is free in matters of religion!” the girl replied resolutely, regaining the courageous boldness that brought her so much honour at Shiu-chow and that probably attracted more than a little odium from the Bolsheviks.<sup>98</sup>

## **The three girls are freed**

The three girls remained at the third town on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday 26-28 February. Meanwhile the regular soldiers, following the pirates’ trail, had captured one of them who had come down from the mountain to buy provisions. At his indication they reached a hut in the mountain where the pirates had moved to on the night of 28 February, taking the girls with them.

On Sunday morning, 2 March, after a brief exchange of fire, the pirates fled, leaving the three girls in the soldiers’ hands, accompanied by Ying-tak. The same evening they faced the captured pirate in a session before the judge, and the following day, Monday 3 March, they were able to reach their Institute at Shiu-chow.

## **News of the killings reaches Shiu-chow. Looking for the bodies**

The boat with the two male teachers arrived in Lin-kong-how toward 5 p.m. on Wednesday 25 February; an hour later a telegram reached Shiu-chow with news of what the teachers knew, that Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario had been captured by pirates.

On Wednesday 26 February, Fr Larena, Bishop Versiglia’s secretary, and Fr Cavada, the missionary from Lin-kong-how, were at the place of the murders and found the remains there of the looting and fire; but they could find out nothing from the few inhabitants around the area, who were terrified and silent.

They spent the night in the mission residence at Sui-pin, where they found out that the two missionaries had been killed.

The following day, Thursday 27 February, they returned to the place of the murders accompanied by the police chief from Sui-pin who was up to date with everything, but to safeguard the responsibility of the people from the place, said he knew nothing. He led the search in such a way that the two missionaries themselves would discover the bodies of those who had been killed.

The two corpses had first of all been buried where they had been killed, in the thicket of bamboo. But that land was private property and the owner would have been upset. During the night they had

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<sup>97</sup> Sun Yat Sen’s three principles. See Chapter 13.

<sup>98</sup> *Summ.* pp. 205, 206, 224. See Chapter 20, section entitled ‘The courage and strength of Thong Su Lien Maria’.

been moved, by boat that still had traces of blood on it to the gravel bed of the Lin-chow river and buried in the sand. The sand which had been dug up was then carefully smoothed down and covered with bamboo, artfully planted so that it looked like it had grown there naturally.

### **The recovery. First tributes laid at the feet of the mortal remains of the two martyrs**

The indirect indications from the chief of police and a handful of soldiers with him, in an almost comical scene,<sup>99</sup> made it possible for the two missionaries to recover the bodies, then taken to Lin-kong-how. Here, a burial chamber was arranged. They remained there until 4 March.

On the evening of Sunday 2 March, 1930, the three girls freed from the pirates' clutches knelt down to pray before the mortal remains of the two heroic missionaries who had given their lives to defend their purity.<sup>100</sup>

Maria, who was called to give evidence at the Ordinary Process, began her report by saying: "I had always had the greatest reverence and affection for Bishop Versiglia. After his death, my affection for him grew even more because he died for me."<sup>101</sup>

On Monday 3 March, the Salesian Superior in China, Fr Ignazio Canazei arrived in Lin-kong-how to bring tribute from the Congregation for the two heroic missionaries:

"Let us say a *De profundis* together" he told the two confreres by his side. He began the prayer. Then he stopped, unsure: "No need," he said "they are martyrs and in no need of suffrages. Just the same, in accordance with the Church's norms we will pray for them." and he went on with the prayer.<sup>102</sup>

The same day Fr Canazei wrote and sent to the Salesian Rector Major, Fr Philip Rinaldi, a report of the murders which concluded thus: "Certainly we are all deeply affected by this very sad event that cost the life of our Apostolic Vicar and an excellent young missionary; but we all feel proud to be the confreres of two martyrs."<sup>103</sup>

### **A casual act of piracy or a premeditated ambush?**

In the months that followed the murders, Bishop Versiglia's secretary, Fr Larena, carried out careful investigations at Shiu-chow and in the Vicariate to throw light on the murders at Li-tau-tsui. The numerous testimonies he gathered led him to conclude that this was a premeditated ambush.

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99 The head of the police and his soldiers continued to say they knew nothing, and meanwhile made every effort for the missionaries to find the bodies as soon as possible and take them well away, in the hope that they could also distance themselves from any responsibility for the killings. The discovery of the bodies described in abundant detail by Fr Larena in *Assassinio di Mons Luigi Versiglia e Don Callisto Caravario*, Hong-kong 1933, pp. 42-73. See also: G. Bosio, *Mons. Versiglia e Don Caravario*, Turin 1935, pp. 112-152.

100 *Summ.* p. 223.

101 *Summ.* p. 199. "Maria Thong Su Lien Maria" writes Bishop Arduino, second successor of Bishop Versiglia in the Shiu-chow Vicariate "was then a teacher in various schools, then the head teacher at our primary school in Lin-chow, respected by everyone for her ability, kindness and honesty. She spoke with everyone, and I myself heard her, of the death of her saviours and confirmed that had she left the girls to their fate they would have saved their own lives." (*Summ.* p. 326).

102 *Summ.* p. 49.

103 *Summ. resp. add.*, p. 30; the original of the letter in Arch. Sal. 9, 3, Vers.

Here is a summary of the results, testified to in the proceedings at the Ordinary and Apostolic Processes. Thong Su Lien Maria, as a small child, according to an ancient Chinese custom, had been promised in marriage to a man whom she then refused.<sup>104</sup>

To remove her from any danger, her father sent her to study at the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians Institute in Shiu-chow.<sup>105</sup> Here she expressed the desire to become a Sister of Mary Help of Christians.<sup>106</sup>

The man whom she had refused had an uncle who was a pirate. They agreed to kidnap the girl on her return to Lin-chow, after she had received her teaching diploma, so she could be forced to marry him.<sup>107</sup>

The inquisitive and indiscreet questioning of the three soldiers during the time the train was stopped at Ho-tow was not purely by chance or without motive. Su Lien, who knew the situation around her well, writes that "I was not happy until I succeeded in making a sign to the bishop to be on guard against these people."<sup>108</sup> But by then they had learned more than enough.

The testimonies state that Su Lien's intended fiancé was among the aggressors. Fr Larena maintains that he could be identified as being with one of the three leaders named by the captured pirate and questioned at Ying-tak on the evening of 2 March 1930. After the abduction, in the pretence that they were casting lots for the three girls, this leader had chosen Su Lien for himself.<sup>109</sup>

After Su Lien's return to Shiu-chow, an individual went twice to the Superior at the Institute where Su Lien was staying, claiming he was known to the pirates, and offered to accompany Su Lien to Lin-chow.<sup>110</sup>

## **Martyrs of purity**

In carrying out the plan, two passions came together: on the one hand, passion for the girls and specifically Su Lien, which led to the abduction; and on the other, anti-religious hatred which went as far as killing the missionaries.

The unbending resistance of the two missionaries brought these two passions together, and this led the assailants to use violence to wrest the girls from their hands. Hatred for religion then decreed their death. This was demanded only by some of the pirates, those for whom religious hatred was the dominating motive.

The two missionaries willingly and generously gave their lives in fulfilment of a pastoral duty to protect the girls entrusted to their responsibility, with an heroic action in defence of their purity.

Martyrs of purity and victims of hatred against the faith and the Catholic religion.

This is how the three girls who had been saved saw them, along with all the Christians in the Vicariate and the entire Catholic world as it gradually became aware of the murders.

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104 *Summ.* pp. 202-203, 209, 255.

105 *Summ.* p. 255.

106 *Summ.* p. 99.

107 *Summ.* pp. 79, 80, 81, 83.

108 See earlier in this chapter, section entitled 'Disturbing questions'.

109 *Summ.* p. 124.

110 *Summ.* pp. 101-102.

The young Church at Shiu-chow saluted its first martyrs in the two victims. In their person and behaviour they had acted like the Good shepherd who gave his life for his sheep.

### **Funeral or triumph?**

On the evening of 4 March, the glorious remains arrived in Shiu-chow.

There was no official reception; but an anonymous crowd gathered, one that only affection invites: the Christians, beneficiaries, admirers of the two deceased heroes. The two biers were accompanied in a sad and devout procession as far as the church at the Salesian Institute, where absolution was imparted.

Fr Caravario's funeral was celebrated on 6 March.

His body was taken to Ho-sai, in the new seminary, because he was a shining model and real encouragement to future apostles.<sup>111</sup>

Bishop Versiglia's funeral was fixed for 13 March. On the evening of the 12th, with a carriage especially set aside by the government, the following arrived for the funeral to take place the following day: Bishop Antonio Fourquet, Vicar Apostolic of Canton; Bishop Enrico Valtorta, Vicar Apostolic of Hong-kong; Bishop John Walsh, Vicar Apostolic of Kong-moon; Bishop Giuseppe da Costa Nunes, Bishop of Macao; Mr Joseph Tang (Bishop Versiglia's godson), the secretary to the Governor of Canton; Dr Wu, a Catholic and professor at the University of Canton, representing the Governor of that city, many other priests and religious.

As soon as they arrived everyone visited the funeral chamber for Bishop Versiglia and admired and kissed the two pictures containing the photographs of the two martyrs surrounded by the ropes they had been tied up with and by rags soaked in their blood.<sup>112</sup> Bishop Antonio Fourquet and Bishop Enrico Valtorta represented the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Celso Costantini. The Italian Consul in Hong-kong was represented by Fr Spada.

The following day, 13 March, the sacred rites took place. More than a funeral ceremony it was a triumph of esteem and affection toward the martyrs.

All the authorities and a crowd of people took part in the funeral procession. The Mandarin of Shiu-chow took part officially and offered two garlands of flowers, one in his name and one in the name of the Governor of Canton.

### **Imitators of their Master, Christ**

They went through the streets of Shiu-chow between two crowded rows of people, silent and reverent. The example of Christ who gave his life for his people, and of his ministers who did not hesitate to imitate their Master in their extreme sacrifice, after having imitated him in the purity of their lives and their charity, deeply affected even the pagans.

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<sup>111</sup> The body was placed in a niche in the wall on the left side ( looking directly at it), of the main door of St Joseph's church in Ho-sai.

<sup>112</sup> The two pictures have been preserved in the Museum of Salesian relics at the Mother House in Turin.

In the church at the Salesian Institute which functioned as a cathedral, there was a sung Mass involving all the authorities. At the end of the Mass the celebrating bishop, Bishop Fourquet, the three other bishops and Fr Spada gave the absolution at the graveside.

The Mandarin of the city, and all the authorities were guests that day at the Bishop's house and publicly expressed the sentiments of admiration and respect for the two deceased heroes.

The Mandarin said that he and all right-thinking Chinese, were precisely aware of the noble mission of the Catholic ministers in China and of the immense good they were achieving, deploring the fact that the Chinese Government, going through a difficult period of organisation and adjustment, was unable to ensure such noble workers complete security in their work for good.

### **“How lucky are they because they have gained the palm of martyrdom”**

At the simple refreshments in the evening, the four Bishops who had honoured the Salesian community with their presence wanted to say something to comfort the new Mission which had been put to the test.

“Not obsequies,” said Bishop Nunes, recalling the beautiful figure of Bishop Versiglia who had been his spiritual director “but a *Te Deum* for the entrance of these martyrs in heaven!

“Bishop Versiglia was always lucky,” said Bishop Valtorta “and ended his life with the greatest luck of all, the palm of martyrdom. The Mission in Shiu-chow could not have better beginnings; vocations to the clergy and Christians will multiply.”

Bishop Fourquet confessed that during the celebration of the Mass, more than praying for the soul of the deceased, he had felt the need to call on the martyr's intercession.<sup>113</sup>

The following morning the four Bishops left, escorted as far as the station by a squad of soldiers, and thanked by the authorities and the Salesians.

### **The Apostolic Delegate in China describes the deceased**

The Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Celso Costantini, had news of the murders on 5 March 1930, while returning from Chungking in Szechwan, where he had consecrated two Chinese bishops: “A veil of profound sadness” he writes “was cast over the shining memory of the consecration of the two Chinese bishops at the news we heard in Wanhsien, of the murder of Bishop Versiglia and one of his Missionaries.”<sup>114</sup>

When he arrived in Peking, he presented his protest to the Minister for Foreign Affairs in China. He then got in contact with the Minister for Italy in Peking, with Bishop Valtorta, Vicar Apostolic in Hong-kong, and with the Provicar in Shiu-chow, Fr Guarona.

In his diary, Archbishop Costantini described the figure of Bishop Versiglia thus:

“I had occasion to meet him many times.

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113 *Summ.* p. 54.

114 C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, Vol. II, p. 160.

“He was typical of the missionary Bishop: simple, courageous, animated by the apostolic fervour that comes from profound piety and seeks nothing other than the glory of God and the spread of his Kingdom among the peoples. As Superior he made himself felt to be more a father and brother than a man of command. Therefore the missionaries and Christians loved and obeyed him gladly. Furthermore, he gave the example of work and charity and asked nothing that he himself had not already done or was ready to do. We felt he was a true son of Don Bosco.”<sup>115</sup>

There could be no better description of Bishop Versiglia, Bishop, Missionary and Salesian.

### **Still among his sheep. A seed that dies to bear fruit**

Bishop Versiglia’s body lay in the church at Don Bosco College at Shiu-chow, near the two Institutes he built for boys and girls in the Vicariate.

Many young people continued to gather each morning for prayers around the glorious remains, young people for whom Bishop had found peaceful asylum and a Christian upbringing. On Sundays the Christian flock for whom the good shepherd had given his life also gathered.

Since 1951 a pall of ice has fallen on all missionary works in China. But the good seed sown will never remain without fruit: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24).

The seed must deteriorate during the winter in the cold and damp soil, so that a stalk can sprout in spring and the ear of wheat mature.

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115 C. Costantini, *Op. cit.* Vol 11 p. 169.

## IN THE GLORY OF THE MARTYRS

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### Reputation for martyrdom

“As Bishop of Macao, on 13 March 1930 I assisted, along with other bishops, at Bishop Versiglia’s funeral” writes Card. Giuseppe da Costa Nunes on 21 June 1973. “No one doubted the martyrdom of Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario, who gave their lives to save the moral life of the girls whom the pirates wanted to make their concubines. One could say that throughout China, as soon as they came to know of the tragic death of these two Servants of God, the general opinion was that we were talking about martyrs in the strict sense of the term.”<sup>1</sup>

The news had the same resonance throughout the world. In the days that followed the murders, statements of esteem and admiration for the two heroic missionaries arrived at Valdocco and Shiu-chow. The firm conviction that this was about martyrdom was widespread, everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

Eight months after the death of Bishop Versiglia, Fr Ignazio Canazei was chosen to succeed him in the Apostolic Vicariate of Shiu-chow. His episcopal consecration was held on 9 November 1930, by the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Celso Costantini. As soon as he arrived in Shiu-chow, together with another four bishops, he immediately wanted to pay tribute to the revered remains of Bishop Versiglia and pray at his tomb. He read the inscription: *Virtute vixit, opera vivit, gloria vivet.*

“Not ‘he will live in glory’” he exclaimed, “but ‘he already lives in the glory of the martyrs.’”<sup>3</sup>

Along with their reputation for martyrdom, devotion to the two martyrs spread surprisingly.

“I was often surprised” wrote Bishop Versiglia’s Provicar in Shiu-chow, “to receive letters from distant countries, from America, England, Spain, from secular and religious people asking for relics of the two martyrs, recommending themselves to their intercession, and some stated that they had obtained special graces.”<sup>4</sup>

Many attributed extraordinary recoveries or miraculous deeds to the two martyrs.

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<sup>1</sup> *Summ. resp. add.* p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. G. Bosio, *Mons. Versiglia e Don Caravario, Testimonianze sull'eccidio dei Li Tow Tsui*, Turin 1935, pp. 176-188.

<sup>3</sup> *umm.* p. 65. Cf. M. Rassiga, *Breve cenno storico*, Part II, p. 225; C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, II, pp. 234-239.

<sup>4</sup> *Summ.* p. 184.



## The conversion of Thong Chong Wai

The first to be “graced” was one of those who witnessed the capture of the two missionaries, young teacher Thong Chong Wai.

He had entered Don Bosco College as a boarding student at Shiu-chow in August 1927, and had taken the teacher’s course there, while his sister, Su Lien Maria, was attending the parallel course at the Institute of Mary Help of Christians. Helped by their cousin Thong Yu, a fervent Christian, and attracted by the calm Salesian atmosphere, Chong Wai had shown sympathy toward and warm acceptance of the Christian faith. Although a pagan, he was regular at prayers and the religious ceremonies, was diligent in his study of the catechism, exemplary in conduct and had asked to be admitted to baptism, which his sister had already received at Christmas 1926. An unfortunate encounter with a Christian companion who showed acrimony and contempt toward him which was far from what conformed to the Gospel, had the same effect on his soul which was opening up to Divine Grace, as hoarfrost has on a newly budding flower. The young man closed in on himself, no longer attended the religious ceremonies, no longer approached the Superiors. Some of his pagan companions who were not very good, did the rest. He joined them in deaf and implacable opposition to the Christian setting that had earlier attracted him so much.

In 1928, he spearheaded a demonstration against the discipline, rules and customs of the College. When the July holidays arrived he was asked not to return for the following school year. Due to an accumulation of circumstances arranged by Providence, he was readmitted after making a written statement that he would no longer exercise a damaging influence on his companions in religious matters. He kept his word and was exemplary in observing the rules. He was able to finish his teaching course and gain his diploma. But where religion was concerned, his clear dissent in no way altered.<sup>5</sup>

Two days before the return to Lin-chow with the group of missionaries, two Salesians who were especially friendly with him made the suggestion that he might soon arrive at baptism.

“Never!” he replied indignantly. And he changed the subject.<sup>6</sup>

But the journey to Lin-chow was, for him, what the road to Damascus was for Saul. The Lord appeared to him in the sacrifice of his martyrs. And that “heroic testimony” cancelled the “counter-testimony” that had frozen his soul. After being released by the pirates and arrived in Lin-kong-how, he was as emotional as if it were a calamity that had happened to one of the people dearest to him. “You cannot imagine how much this sad news affected me,” he wrote on 1 March 1930 to his father, alluding to the murder of the two missionaries.<sup>7</sup>

On 4 March 1930, as soon as Fr Larena arrived in Shiu-chow, accompanying the mortal remains of the two martyrs, Thong Chong Wai met him and said to him:

“Father, give me the prayer book and catechism. I want to prepare myself for baptism.”<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, his health was not good. In the previous years he had had symptoms of pulmonary tuberculosis. The trauma he had experienced in the capture of the two missionaries, then being in wet clothes for all of that cold February afternoon, after their hasty fording of the Sui-pin river, saw

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<sup>5</sup> Report by Fr Carlo Braga, then the Rector of Don Bosco College in Shiu-chow, *Summ.* p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> G. Bosio, *Mons. Versiglia e Don Caravario*, Turin 1935, p.171.

<sup>7</sup> Second letter to her father, *Summ.* p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> *Informatio super martyrio*, p. 92.

his poor health further deteriorate. He was repeatedly coughing up blood and ended up in hospital in a very serious condition in Shiu-chow. On 13 April 1930, he received baptism with moving devotion. He then received holy Communion almost every day until 30 April when he died in his father's arms, telling him his final wish: "Have my two children baptised ... and have all the family baptised so they can be with me in the place of happiness I am going to."<sup>9</sup>

It was the first fruits of the blood of the two heroic missionaries, since "the blood of martyrs is a seed."<sup>10</sup>

### **Bishop Versiglia appears to his successor in the episcopate**

A miracle happened in spring 1932 to Bishop Versiglia's successor in the Shiu-chow Vicariate, Bishop Ignazio Canazei, an austere, positive man who was completely alien to hallucinations and suggestion. He himself spoke about it to one of his missionaries, Fr Pietro Battezzati. The latter wrote it down and confirmed it by oath to judges at the process for the beatification of the two martyrs.

"Not long ago," Bishop Canazei said "after looking for the umpteenth time, but always in vain, in my office for some important documents for the Mission, given the already late hour, I retired to my adjacent bedroom to go to bed. Meanwhile I was thinking about Bishop Versiglia, almost calling on him to get me to find these documents belonging to his episcopate. A little after midnight I woke up and was amazed to see a light filtering through the gap in the door to my office. Thinking that I had forgotten to put out the oil lamp I got up to go and put it out. After opening the door, I saw the office all lit up, and in the middle of it, standing there and smiling, Bishop Versiglia. I experienced wonder, not fear; and I looked at him smiling. He smiled back, and then speaking to me cheerfully and confidentially like he used to do when he was alive, he pointed to the double bottom of the large cupboard-archive that almost covered the entire wall of the office and where the documents I had spent so long looking for were hidden.

"It was not a dream. It was real; and so I immediately found the documents I needed. I thanked him and then asked him a few things, putting the following question to him:

'Tell me, Bishop, when they killed you, did you go straight to Paradise?'

"Becoming even more luminous and smiling he replied in Chinese:

'Cek Kat' that means to say: instantaneously!

"Then he disappeared and everything returned to darkness."<sup>11</sup>

The first Salesian Martyr was pleased to help get his successor in the episcopate out of difficulty and strengthen his faith, as Jesus had done with his Apostle Thomas.

### **Miraculous recovery of the Shiu-chow Mandarin's secretary**

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 50, 13, CC, I, 171.

<sup>11</sup> *Summ. resp. add.* pp. 83-84.

Fr Battezzati once again vouches under oath for another miraculous happening that he heard from the very person who obtained the grace of an instant recovery.

“The secretary of the Mandarin of Shiu-chow, a literary man whose surname was Vong, was ill with tuberculosis and so sick that he could no longer get out of bed. One day, sick in bed, he had a very strange dream. He seemed to hear a knock on the door of the room, and at his invitation, he saw a missionary come in. We need to note that he was a pagan and had never had anything to do with the missionaries. Amazed, he asked him what he wanted. The missionary, smiling, approached his bed, and after the usual compliments, asked about his health and how he was feeling.

“Very poorly” he replied. “The doctors say that by now there is nothing they can do.”

“No,” the missionary retorted “it is very easy to recover from your illness. Take this medicine I will give you for three days consecutively, and I guarantee you will recover.”

The sick man, still in the dream, looked at him almost incredulously; but a thread of hope entering his heart had him smiling and he promised to be what he had been asked. The missionary then wrote a prescription for a Chinese concoction and told him once again to take it for three consecutive days, certain that he would recover. The sick man thanked him and wanted to give him some money, but the missionary gentleman refused. Then Mr Vong asked him to accept it for his orphans, and the missionary agreed. When the missionary had left – we are still in the dream – Mr Vong called his wife and told her what had happened, asking her to go and buy the medicine and prepare it. His wife, though not believing all this and almost under duress went and bought the medicine and prepared it in order not to go against her husband’s wishes. The patient took it but did not notice any improvement. In fact, on the second day he felt worse, so much so that his wife did not wish to prepare the medicine for the third day and only gave in at her husband’s insistence. The medicine was prepared for the third day and – still as part of the dream – while sipping it he woke up.

As soon as he awoke he was wondering about the dream, but to his greater amazement still he felt fully recovered. The same day he returned to the Mandarin’s office, to everybody else’s amazement.

Some months later, when he had some business to attend to with the Mission, he went to the Bishop’s residence. In the parlour he saw a picture of Bishop Versiglia hanging on the wall. It was the missionary who had appeared to him in the dream. Great was his joy and he immediately asked if he could speak with that missionary. They told him it was Bishop Versiglia, who was killed some years before.”<sup>12</sup>

News of extraordinary recoveries continued to arrive from all over the world.

### **The beatification process**

On 20 February 1932 The Provincial Chapter in China, meeting in Macao, unanimously decided to open the Cause for the beatification of Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario. In June 1934, the Postulator General of the Salesian Congregation prepared the items for the informative process.

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<sup>12</sup> *Summ. resp. add.* pp. 84-85.

The Ordinary Process as it is known was held in Shiu-chow from 13 December 1934 to 8 October 1935. The Cause was then introduced officially on 13 June 1952. The Apostolic Processes were held in Hong-kong from 14 July 1953 to 18 March 1954, and in Turin from 21 September 1953 to 17 April 1957.

In total, the cause had 39 witnesses available to it, of whom at least 7 *de visu* (eyewitnesses) of the murder, and 41 testimonies; there was also a collection of other documents and declarations able to throw light on factors relating to the Ordinary Process.

At the conclusion of the investigation and discussions by the competent commissions, his Holiness Paul VI, on 13 November 1976, promulgated the Decree officially declaring Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario as Martyrs.

They are the Salesian Protomartyrs.

In his message for World Mission Day 1963, Pope Paul VI expressed his “fears for the current situation of the Church in China” and “a firm hope” as well: “The seed sown in fertile furrows amid tears” he wrote, “can only but germinate at the right time and be harvested amid the exaltation of the whole Church.”<sup>13</sup>

The people of God wait confidently for the Lord to glorify his Martyrs and see that the seed sown by them in Chinese soil and sprinkled with their blood will germinate.

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<sup>13</sup> *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, I (1963), Tipogr. Poligl. Vaticana, Rome 1965, p. 253.