
STUDI

DON BOSCO'S MISSIONARY CALL AND CHINA

Carlo Socol *

Comparative Chronology:

(A) General Events

- 1839-1842 1st Opium War:
Treaty of Nanking
- 1840/09 Martyrdom of Gabriel Perboyre
- 1843 Cause of beatification
of Perboyre begins
- 1853-1854 Japan opens to outside world
- 1856 Martyrdom of Auguste Chapdelaine
- 1858-1860 2nd Opium War
- 1860/10 Treaty of Tientsin:
French Protectorate
- 1862 Canonization of Martyrs
of Nagasaki (1597)
- 1867 Beatification of Japanese Martyrs
(1617-32)
- 1867/09 Bishop E. Zanoli
of Hupei visits Valdocco

- 1869-1870 1st Vatican Council
- 1870 Bishops from China visit Valdocco
- 1870 Anti-foreign violence in Tientsin

- 1873/04 Consecration of Shrine of Zo-sé
(Shanghai)
- 1874 Anti-foreign violence in Yunnan
- 1875 Anti-foreign violence in Szechwan
- 1885-1886 Persecution in Kiangsi

(B) Salesian Events

- 1841 Don Bosco ordained a priest
- 1845 1st edition of the *Storia Ecclesiastica*

- 1859 Birth of the Salesian Society
- 1864 Comboni at Valdocco speaks
about Africa
- 1869 The Holy See approves
the Salesian Society
- 1869 Mons. Lavigerie invites Salesians
to Algeria
- 1869-70 3rd Edition of the
Storia Ecclesiastica
- 1870 Negotiations for San Francisco
- 1870/07 Comboni's proposal for Cairo
- 1871-72 1st missionary dream
- 1873/10 Negotiations with
Msgr. T. Raimondi begin
- 1874/04 Salesian Constitutions approved
- 1875/11 1st Mission to Argentina
- 1885/07 Dream about Angel of Arphaxad
- 1886/04 Dream of Barcelona:
Peking, Meaco...
- 1886/10 Conversation with
A. Conelli in San Benigno
- 1886 Spiritual Testament
- 1888/1 Death of Don Bosco
- 1890 Conelli contacts Rondina
about Macao

* Salesiano, docente di Storia Ecclesiastica presso lo Holy Spirit Seminary di Hong Kong.

Preamble

After having established his missions in South America, late in his life Don Bosco confidently wrote in his Spiritual Testament about the future development of Salesian Missions in China:

“Time will come when our missions will be established in China and precisely in Peking. But let us never forget that we go for poor and abandoned boys. There, among peoples unknown and ignorant of the true God, you will see wonders formerly thought incredible, but which almighty God will make manifest to the world”¹.

Don Bosco, who wrote his Spiritual Testament in stages, in all likelihood entered these words in the summer of 1886 in the wake of a dream he had in Barcelona in the night between 9 and 10 April that had left in him a deep and emotionally charged impression. In it, from the top of a hill near Becchi, the land of his first dream, he saw the expansion of Salesian work in the world spanning from Valparaiso all the way to Peking. What he saw in this last of his important dreams represented the fulfilment of his apostolic aspirations and the field of action God wished to entrust to future generations of Salesians. How Don Bosco came to express his belief that his work would one day extend to China is what this essay attempts to explore, beginning from what has been described as his “missionary call”².

¹ Francesco MOTTO, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel sac. Gio. Bosco a' suoi figliuoli Salesiani [Testamento spirituale]*, in “Ricerche Storiche Salesiane” (= RSS) 6 (1985) 127. Quotations in English of original Italian documents or texts are our own translations, unless otherwise specified.

² *Archival sources:*

- ASC Archivio Salesiano Centrale;
- APF Archivio di Propaganda Fide;
- AIC Archivio Ispettorica Cina;
- AG-PIME Archivio Generale P.I.M.E.;
- HKCDA Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives.

Often quoted printed sources:

- OE Giovanni BOSCO, *Opere Edite* (Ristampa anastatica), Prima serie, voll. I-XXXVII. Roma, LAS 1976-1977;
- MO Giovanni BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, (ed. Eugenio Ceria). Torino 1946;
- MOE John BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory*. New Rochelle 1999;
- E Giovanni BOSCO, *Epistolario*, (ed. Eugenio Ceria), vol. I-IV. Torino 1955-1959;
- E(m) Giovanni BOSCO, *Epistolario*, (ed. F. Motto) vol. I-IV published so far. Roma, LAS 1991-2003.

Often quoted literature:

- MB Giovanni Battista LEMOYNE, *Memorie biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco*, vol. I-IX. San Benigno e Torino 1898-1917; Eugenio CERIA, *Memorie biografiche del*

1. The missionary call of Don Bosco

Veteran Salesian historians P. Stella, P. Braido and F. Desramaut have produced syntheses of the life and work of Don Bosco of undisputable quality, the result of a life-long dedication to a better understanding of the historical Don Bosco and of the Society he founded³. Several other scholars and researchers have studied his missionary ideal and strategy in some detail⁴. And still we do not have a definitive synthesis of this, which Don Bosco himself in 1875 termed “il principio di una grande opera”, “the beginning of a great enterprise”⁵.

November 11, 1875 marks the day on which the first Salesian missionary expedition left Turin for Argentina. The Salesian Society had its Constitutions approved only the previous year. Professed members numbered

- beato Giovanni Bosco, vol. XI-XIX. Torino 1930-1939; Angelo AMADEI, *Memorie biografiche di San Giovanni Bosco*, vol. X: 1871-1874, Torino 1939.
- BM English translation: Giovanni Battista LEMOYNE, Eugenio CERIA, Angelo AMADEI, *Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*. New Rochelle NY, Don Bosco Publications 1965-2004;
- Annali Eugenio CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, 4 voll. Torino 1941-1951.

³ Pietro STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica, I, Vita e Opere*. Roma, LAS 1979. Francis DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps (1815-1888)*. Torino, SEI 1996. Pietro BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, 2 voll. Roma, LAS 2002.

⁴ Agostino FAVALE, *Il progetto missionario di Don Bosco e i suoi presupposti storico-dottrinali*, in “Quaderni di Salesianum”, Roma, LAS 1976. ID., *Le missioni nei primordi della Congregazione Salesiana*, in Pietro SCOTTI (ed.), *Missioni Salesiane (1875-1975). Studi in occasione del Centenario*. CSSMS Studi e Ricerche 3. Roma, LAS 1977, pp. 13-48; Francis DESRAMAUT, *Il pensiero missionario di Don Bosco dagli scritti e discorsi del 1870-1885*, in P. SCOTTI (ed.), *Missioni Salesiane 1875-1975*, pp. 49-61; Jesús BORREGO, *Il primo iter missionario nel progetto di Don Bosco e nell'esperienza concreta di Don Cagliero (1875-1877)*, in P. SCOTTI (ed.), *Missioni Salesiane 1875-1975*, pp. 63-86. Raul A. ENTRAIGAS, *Los Salesianos en la Argentina, I*. Buenos Aires 1973; Angel Martin GONZALEZ, *Trece escritos ineditos de San Juan Bosco al consul argentino J. B. Gazzolo*. Guatemala 1978; ID., *Origen de las Misiones Salesianas. La Evangelización de las gentes según el pensamiento de San Juan Bosco*. Guatemala, Istituto Teologico Salesiano 1978; Jesus BORREGO, *Primer proyecto patagónico de Don Bosco*, in RSS 8 (1986) 21-72. ID., *Estrategia misionera de Don Bosco*, in Pietro BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco nella Chiesa a servizio dell'umanità. Studi e testimonianze*. Roma, LAS 1987, pp. 143-202; Arthur LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco. Esame storico-critico, significato e ruolo profetico per l'America Latina*, in Cosimo SEMERARO (ed.), *Don Bosco e Brasilia. Profetia, realtà sociale e diritto*. Padova, Cedam 1999, pp. 85-130; Antonio DA SILVA FERREIRA, *Due sogni sulle missioni della Patagonia e dell'America Latina*, in RSS 28 (1996) 101-139; ID., *Patagonia. Realtà e mito nell'azione missionaria salesiana*. Piccola Biblioteca dell'ISS, 16. Roma, LAS 1995; Jesus BORREGO, *Las llamadas “Memorias” del Cardenal Giovanni Cagliero*, in RSS 19 (1991) 295-353. Maria A. NICOLETTI, *El discurso misionero salesiano a través de “Recopilación de vedute della missione salesiana della Patagonia” de Domenico Milanese (1904)*, in RSS 46 (2005) 89-124.

⁵ MB XI 385.

171, a mere 64 of whom were in perpetual vows. A further 116 novices and aspirants were being formed, a sign of robust growth and vitality: the young Society was developing fast, no doubt, but it was also running 8 houses, and so the move was indeed a bold one⁶. As it turned out, it was the first step of an amazing expansion destined to bring Don Bosco's charism in the following decades – during his lifetime and especially after his death – to the five Continents. Faith, passion for souls and a spirituality of apostolic action had inspired Don Bosco to send his young and as yet inexperienced disciples on that brave adventure:

“Il 1875 segnava l'inizio dell'espansione dell'opera di don Bosco oltre i confini italiani in Europa e nell'America latina. Non era una sorpresa per chi aveva potuto intuire il suo temperamento e la sua fede. Questo nuovo balzo in avanti era connotato con la sua indole, la sua impazienza e inquietudine pastorale, che non gli consentiva di fermarsi ai traguardi raggiunti. Rispondeva pure a sue preoccupazioni rese più o meno esplicite: l'istituzione, la Congregazione, avrebbe potuto correre il rischio dell'appagamento e della fossilizzazione se non si fosse protesa verso nuovi obiettivi, come avviene – secondo la sua dottrina spirituale – in ogni cammino di perfezionamento morale e religioso, che si arrestasse nel compiacimento dei traguardi raggiunti: *non progredi regredi est*”⁷.

Don Bosco was a man capable of biding his time, as he showed time and again, but resting on his laurels was not part of his character. Of course there were also external elements pressing him on, such as the many legalistic limits being imposed on him by local civil authorities and by ecclesiastical ones: the obligation of academic qualifications, school inspections, paralysing rules on the civil front; rigorous norms in line with those of established Congregations on sacred ordinations, on religious formation, on ecclesiastical curricula, on the admission to the profession of vows, and the barring of access to the so-called “privileges” on the ecclesiastical one. It was within this context, in the years 1874-1875, that the idea of the Salesian Co-operator and expansion abroad, in France and South America, came to fruition. Don Bosco would direct the French operations personally, making them the object of his special attention and of frequent visits. As for the American missionary expansion, he had no choice but to develop new modalities to direct, support and animate it from a distance, with all the uncertainties that such plan entailed⁸.

⁶ These figures show a 16% increase over the previous year, 1874, when there were 148 confreres, of whom only 42 were perpetually professed, and 103 novices and aspirants. MB X 1231; XI 1.

⁷ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. II, p. 129.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.

In the 1870s frequent requests had reached Don Bosco for the supply of Salesian personnel to various missions: Cairo in Africa, San Francisco and Savannah in the United States, Mangalore in India, Hong Kong and China, and finally Australia. But his tentative plans in those lands did not materialize. “Apart from shortage of personnel, what made him hesitant were the difficulties created by countries outside Italy’s great migration tides, whose language and culture were significantly different from the neo-Latin roots of his prospective mission hands. For this reason he responded with surprising speed to invitations issuing from Argentina”⁹.

1.1. *Ideal and reality: evolution of a project*

That November 11, 1875 opened an entirely new page in the life of the young Congregation. It may be worth asking what Don Bosco was trying to achieve by this first sending of his men across the Ocean. The answer to this question is less straightforward than we might wish or expect it to be. What Don Bosco intended to do, the moves he actually made and what he eventually managed to accomplish went through a process of evolution dictated by the necessities of a reality he only gradually understood, a *modus agendi* that seems to have accompanied him throughout his life¹⁰. He had accepted to send his Salesians to tend a public church in the Argentinean capital of Buenos Aires and run a small boarding school – initially with room for no more than fifty boarders¹¹ – in the frontier town of San Nicolás de los Arroyos, on the banks of the Parana river, within days of receiving an invitation. His preliminary three point proposal – send some priests to set up a central house in Buenos Aires, send another small contingent of priests, clerics and lay brothers to San Nicolás, with the possibility of branching out to other works “as the Ordinary would think fit” – could scarcely constitute a plan! For all the intense preparations prior to the departure, the Congregation and Don Bosco himself had only vague ideas of, and hence were unprepared for what was awaiting them in Argentina: the one thing that Don Bosco was sure of, and that his sons soon perceived, was that God wanted them to be “in the Missions”, whatever that meant, because he never spelled it out in clear, systematic or univocal terms either¹².

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

¹⁰ Pietro BRAIDO, *Il progetto operativo di Don Bosco e l'utopia della società cristiana*. Quaderni di Salesianum, 6. Roma, LAS 1981, p. 5.

¹¹ E III 1453.

¹² MB XI 372-390; Don Bosco to Espinosa, 22.12.1875, in E(m) IV, 2043. For Don Bosco's idea of “Missions”, see F. DESRAMAUT, *Il pensiero missionario di Don Bosco...*, pp. 49-61.

Contacts had been made through Giovanni Battista Gazzolo, the Argentinean consul in Savona. Through him Don Bosco had offered his readiness to provide priests to officiate in the Mother of Mercy church in Buenos Aires and accepted the invitation from the San Nicolás founding committee to run their school. In his first personal reply to the Buenos Aires diocesan curia he introduced the Salesian Society as having “the care of poor youth as its primary objective”, but ready to extend its services to any type of sacred ministry. With Don Pietro Ceccarelli, the parish priest of San Nicolás, he was more specific. He wrote: “...our only desire is to work in the field of sacred ministry, especially in favour of poor and abandoned youth. Catechism classes, schools, preaching, Sunday recreation centres, hospices and boarding schools are our main harvest fields”. And to the San Nicolás committee he wrote along the same lines¹³. What was asked of Don Bosco, and the services he was offering, did not differ in anyway from what he was doing in Turin or in the boarding schools he had just opened on the Riviera in Liguria, at Alassio (1870) and Varazze (1872), only he was expanding across the ocean.

But the news which he broke on 28 January 1875 to the rectors gathered for their annual on-going formation conference focused on “missions in America”. The following day, the message was relayed to the entire community of Salesians and boarders gathered in a carefully choreographed assembly in the main study hall in Valdocco. In its content the message was plain and objective. The letters from Buenos Aires and San Nicolás were read out by Mr. Gazzolo: basically they were going to Argentina to take over a church and a boarding school. But the audience was left in no doubt as to what the entire proceedings amounted to, as reflected in Don Ceria’s caption, which read: “Final acceptance of the Missions in South America”, when no mission had been offered. It was by no means the only metamorphosis of the project. It is sufficiently clear that it was Don Bosco who had moved the first step through his intermediary, yet he played things to his advantage by declaring he had received an “invitation” from Argentina. Conditions had been

¹³ MB X 1303-1304; 1306-1307. Don Bosco did, on one instance and in general terms, refer to the sending of Salesians to tend church and school at San Nicolás as “Missione di Salesiani”. Don Bosco to Ceccarelli, 25.12.1874, E(m) IV, 2048.

Giovanni Battista Gazzolo (1827-1895) was born in Liguria. He made a career at sea, reaching the position of captain. In 1858 he emigrated to Argentina, where he taught (1860-1863) and was appointed head Librarian at the University of Buenos Aires (1863-1868). As Argentinean consul in Savona (1869-1895) he promoted Italian emigration to Argentina.

Pietro Ceccarelli (1842-1893) was born in Modena and held degrees in theology and canon law. In 1871 he left for Argentina and was parish priest of San Nicolás de los Arroyos from 1873 to 1893, when he returned to his native town, where he died shortly thereafter. Don Bosco had made his acquaintance before he left for Argentina. E(m) III, 2043, 2074.

put and accepted, he said, with one reserve, i.e. the approval of the Holy Father, when he knew this was all but assured. In the words of Desramaut, Don Bosco had treated his boys and confreres to a piece of sleight of hand without their knowing it: the Missions appeared out of nowhere. All, even the doubters, were left ecstatic and were won over to the project¹⁴. A few days later he put his vision into words in a circular letter addressed to all the members of the Society, canvassing for volunteers: "Among the many proposals received to establish *missions in foreign countries* – he wrote – the one from Argentina seems to be the best. Apart from some civilized areas, immense territories in that country are inhabited by savage tribes, among whom, by the grace of God, the Salesians can exercise their zeal"¹⁵. So, there we have it: the allure of engaging in the evangelization of "savage tribes", a plan he had in mind and that went well beyond what was being offered. In the months to come he would speak more and more often of "savages".

At this stage the Archbishop of Buenos Aires was not aware of – and hence had not agreed to – any "foreign missions" plan, but Don Bosco went ahead organizing what one could argue was the vaguely worded third item of the three-point plan he had submitted to the curia, the "other works as the Ordinary would think fit" he was ready to engage in. And he did it with his usual energy and determination. On 31 August 1875 he wrote to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Card. Alessandro Franchi describing his acceptance of the San Nicolás school precisely to serve as a base for the "missions". It being the first time that the Salesian Congregation was "opening houses in the foreign missions" he asked for the departing Salesians – and obtained – the privileges normally granted to apostolic missionaries¹⁶. Don Bosco got recognition, but did not get the subsidies he had hoped for, since Argentina did not come under the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide. Nor did he obtain any subsidy from the Lyon-based Association for the Propagation of the Faith, because in their reckoning his was not a "mission". During the summer he handpicked the ten who would make up the first band of missionaries. As the day drew near, the Catholic weekly *L'Unità Cattolica* announced the departure of the "Salesian missionaries"¹⁷. At the solemn and moving departure ceremony on November 11 Don Bosco's speech was centered around the

¹⁴ MB XI 143-145; F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps...*, pp. 956-957.

¹⁵ *Circolare di Don Bosco ai Soci Salesiani*, dated 5 February 1875, in MB XI 143.

¹⁶ E(m) IV, 2178. Cardinal Alessandro Franchi (1819-1878) was prefect of Propaganda Fide from 1874 to 1878.

¹⁷ "L'Unità Cattolica" of 6 agosto 1876, quoted in P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. II, pp. 146 and 148.

theme of the universal mission entrusted by Our Lord to the Apostles and the entire Church, to which the expedition about to set sail was the response by the young Congregation. He spoke of the great shortage of priests in Argentina, of the needs of Italian immigrant families and the work of evangelization and civilization among the large tribes of “savages” of Patagonia and the Pampas that awaited the missionaries. The two houses of Buenos Aires and San Nicolás did not feature in the speech.

The rationale behind this shift in emphasis is explained by Don Cesare Chiala, the “publicist” of the Salesian Missions in South America. In 1876 he wrote:

“One should notice that at that time three proposals were put to the Salesian Congregation, all of them attractive: the savages in India, in Australia and in Patagonia [...]. Patagonia was the preferred choice. But since the missionaries who in the past attempted to penetrate those tribes were almost all victims of those men-eaters, a new plan was drawn up: to set up schools and boarding houses in the towns bordering with the savages; accept also their children, in order to learn their language, customs and traditions, and in such a way set up social and religious relationships. It was hence necessary to open a boarding school in Buenos Aires as a centre of communications. Very handy was also the offer of a school in San Nicolás”¹⁸.

In Chiala’s account, which echoes a dream Don Bosco had revealed that year¹⁹, the *Mother of Mercy* Church had disappeared, while the San Nicolás school is mentioned as an accessory: the “savages” were centrepiece. The project had become, intentionally at least, one of *missio ad gentes* in its most classic meaning, albeit with a novel methodology. Why the savages, one might ask? “In general always keep in mind that God wants us to direct our efforts towards the Pampas and the Patagonians and towards poor and abandoned children”, Don Bosco recommended Don G. Cagliero²⁰. It was a

¹⁸ Cesare CHIALA, *Da Torino alla Repubblica Argentina. Lettere dei Missionari Salesiani*. Letture Cattoliche. Torino 1876, pp. 21-22. Don Cesare Chiala (1837-1876) was one of the first boys to attend the Valdocco Oratory. His role as “publicist” of the missions consisted in editing letters coming from the missions for publication. *Cronichetta* ASC, A0000105, p. 7; E II, 1403, 1449.

¹⁹ For this “dream of 1871-1872”, the first missionary dream, see below on pp. 28ff.

²⁰ Don Bosco to Cagliero, 01.08.1876, E III, 1477.

Giovanni Cagliero (1838-1926), first Salesian bishop and cardinal, was one of the first boys of Don Bosco and decided to stay with him. He is considered one of the founders of the Salesian Society. He obtained a doctorate in Sacred Theology from the University of Turin in 1863, having been ordained the previous year. He was chosen to head the first group of missionaries who departed for Argentina in 1875. From 1884 to 1904 he was Vicar Apostolic of Patagonia. He returned to Italy, was made a cardinal by Benedict XV and, as a member of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, was instrumental in obtaining the Vicariate Apostolic of

matter of preferential choice: "The world will always welcome us as long as all our concern is for the savages, for poor children, for those members of society most in danger...", he would explain late in his life in his Spiritual Testament²¹.

That was the horizon in 1876. Don Bosco did not rest until he achieved his goal of obtaining an independent mission territory in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. The metamorphosis of his plan in action right from its start, and the different messages he would convey at the same time to different audiences or people, may be explained by any one or all of the following factors, which one can actually detect in Don Bosco's correspondence, where past and present, real and virtual, fact and fantasy sometimes mingle freely: (1) Don Bosco, unable to grasp the full implications and opportunities of his swift decision, allowed himself to be guided by circumstances and adopted a step by step approach²². (2) Don Bosco's decision was quick but not sudden: for a long time he actually had harboured a missionary vocation, which was kept alive and directed by recurring dreams and signs, so that, when the occasion presented itself, he knew he had to go for it and played his cards with wisdom and skill: his contemporaries would essentially subscribe to this view. (3) Flexibility and diversified propaganda were part of a carefully arranged effort aimed at attracting new vocations and securing the financial support of various benefactors and institutions, both being major worries: Don Bosco soon realized that without a Vicariate Apostolic of his own in Patagonia, Propaganda Fide, as he wrote to Don G. Costamagna, "gives us nothing"²³.

In April 1876 Don Bosco would insist that the primary objective of the expedition had been and was the evangelization of the Indians²⁴. To reach it he would push with energy and passion, but also with the view blurred by distance and an imagination fed by the often inadequate literature he consulted:

Shiu Chow (China) for the Salesian Congregation in 1917. In 1920 he was assigned to the diocese of Frascati and died in Rome in 1926.

²¹ F. MOTTO, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6...*, p. 127.

²² F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps...*, p. 960.

²³ Don Bosco to Costamagna, 12.11.1880, in E III, 2108. See also Don Bosco to Franchi 31.08.1875, and Don Bosco to Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi, in E(m) IV, 2178, 2223, 2227.

Giacomo Costamagna (1846-1921) entered the Oratory at the age of twelve and studied music under G. Cagliero. He professed in 1867, was ordained a priest in 1868 and was spiritual director of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from 1874 to 1877, when he left for America. He was Provincial of Buenos Aires (1880-1894) and Vicar Apostolic of Méndez y Gualaquiza in Ecuador in a rather hostile environment. He resigned in 1918.

²⁴ Don Bosco to Cagliero, 27.04.1876 and 01.08.1876, E III, 1445, 1477.

and so the meek savage would become the ferocious savage or vice versa, according to the perception of the moment²⁵. Before he planned a new, independent mission territory for the Salesians to exercise the ministry on their own, he even went so far as to suggest a project to the Italian government to establish an Italian colony in Patagonia, which he thought was *res nullius*, claimed by no country in particular²⁶. He had originally envisaged a blitz-like mission for Cagliari: he gave his chosen leader till 1877 – less than two years! – to establish the American enterprise; he then had to return to take charge of the Indian mission which he had accepted from the Holy See for 1878 from among several proposals that had been put to him. Both Pius IX and Card. Franchi had come forward with proposals for Asia, with the Prefect of Propaganda apparently trying to induce Don Bosco to abandon his project of a Patagonian mission: plans were underway – and would be carried out in the following years – to subdivide some of China’s Vicariates Apostolic, as a result of which some of the new or old jurisdictions would be vacant. One had been offered to Don Bosco²⁷. For a while he thought it possible – and repeatedly wrote about the possibility – to launch forays on two fronts, in America and in Asia, and thus embrace the whole world, in one go²⁸.

The propaganda effort at times would get out of hand and reflect fantasy rather than reality, to the dismay of Don Cagliari and Don Luigi Lasagna (1850-1895) who provided more accurate information, called for prudence and suggested a change in timing and priorities: the Salesians were already overstretched, with Don Giovanni Battista Baccino (1843-1877) soon dying of overexertion, and the work at hand among the immigrants, compared with the launching of the Patagonian mission, appeared all the more pastorally urgent, because, having left their home country, these people were at risk of “becoming themselves savages” if their spiritual needs were left unattended²⁹.

²⁵ F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps...*, p. 958; P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. II, p. 151; E III 1453.

²⁶ J. BORREGO, *Primer proyecto...*, pp. 28-33, 39-42.

²⁷ E III, 52; MB XII 192. Between 1878 and 1882 four new vicariates were created in China. Cf Joseph DE MOIDREY, *La Hiérarchie Catholique en Chine, en Corée et au Japon (1307-1914)*. Zikawei, Imprimerie de l’Orphelinat de Tousewe 1914, p. 258.

²⁸ Don Bosco to Cagliari, 27.04.1876 in E III, 1445; also *ibid.* 1435, 1511, 1517, 1526, 1534, 1548, 1555, 1559. In a series of letters to Don Bosco between May and December 1876 Cagliari delicately objected to the plan as impracticable. J. BORREGO, *Il primo iter missionario...*, p. 77. By May 1877 the plan to send people to Asia at this stage had been effectively called off. Don Bosco to Cagliari, 12.05.1877, E III, 1586.

²⁹ J. BORREGO, *Il primo iter missionario...*, pp. 66, 80. On Baccino (1843-1877), Jesús BORREGO, *Giovanni Battista Baccino. Estudio y edición de su Biografía y Epistolario*. Roma, LAS 1977.

Luigi Lasagna (1850-1895) became acquainted with Don Bosco in 1862 and decided to

Strategies changed. Eventually in 1883 Don Bosco obtained the mission territories he had strenuously sought since 1875: the Vicariate Apostolic of Northern and Central Patagonia, which ran effectively only from 1885 to 1904, with Giovanni Cagliero as its first Vicar Apostolic; and the Prefecture Apostolic of Southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, with Mons. Giuseppe Fagnano (1844-1916) at the helm. Yet even in Don Bosco's own lifetime the work of the Congregation was eventually carried out mainly through boarding schools, eleven of them, strategically positioned in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile and Ecuador. For all the effort he put, Don Bosco's original plan for the "savages" never materialized in a substantial way. Retouched by circumstances and field experience, the plan that the Congregation inherited from her dynamic founder came to resemble more and more the strategy adopted by another dynamic founder, Ignatius of Loyola: the multiplication of schools, without, however, missing the chance of courageous forays in the field of direct mission work at the service of peoples in need of evangelization and human development³⁰.

1.2. *Missionary expansion or geographical universalism?*

There is little doubt that by sending his sons to America Don Bosco answered a missionary call. How far this was *his personal call* remains to be seen: it is a fact that Don Bosco never left for the missions. And yet the decision to start mission work was his. As the preparations were being made and the first group of Salesians set sail for Argentina to begin their work it certainly would appear that *his call* was gradually becoming inseparable from that of the Society he had founded: the plan he launched in November 1875 moulded the face and destiny of the Salesian Society, while the latter's hard

move to Valdocco. He professed as a Salesian in 1868, was ordained in 1873 and left for Uruguay in 1876, where he successfully established several houses prior to extending Salesian work to Brazil. He was made a bishop in 1893 and in this capacity exercised the role of mediator in several Latin American countries. He died in a train crash in Brazil.

³⁰ F. DESRAMAUT, *Il pensiero missionario di Don Bosco...*, pp. 58-61. See also P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. II, pp. 136-142. Braido speaks of the mission efforts 1874-1876 as: "Effective implantation among immigrants and locals and a tendency [it. *tensione*] towards missions".

Giuseppe Fagnano (1844-1916) first worked as a Red Cross volunteer in the army. He professed as a Salesian in 1864, was ordained a priest in 1868 and left for Argentina with the first expedition in 1875. He was first rector at San Nicolás and then at Patagones. As Prefect Apostolic of Southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego (1883-1912) he was remarkable for establishing the mission there and for defending the indigenous tribes. He died in Santiago, Chile.

earned field experience, sifting dream from reality, gave concrete expression to its founder's intuition and tireless drive.

As invitations to expand abroad or provide personnel for the missions began to arrive, in the audience of 28 June 1871 Don Bosco sought the advice of Pius IX as to whether he should accept these invitations, or should rather concentrate on reinforcing the work of the Salesian Society in Italy. The advice he got was that he should give attention to the latter³¹. Up until at least 1874 there is no evidence of a Congregational mission plan. Perhaps it was not called for, as given the intensely missionary climate of the 19th century it was natural for newly founded religious Congregations to join in mission work, as Don Bosco had already noted of several young Congregations in the 1845 edition of his *Storia Ecclesiastica* (his *Ecclesiastical History*)³². But was he aware, as some authors affirm, of the Holy See's "explicit desire" that all new Congregations should include and list mission work among their objectives³³? In this respect it is quite significant that "foreign missions" do not feature in the Constitutions for which Don Bosco secured final approval on April 3, 1874, the objectives of the Salesian Society being therein described as "every sort of spiritual and material love towards the young, especially the poor ones, as well as the education of the young clergy". These Constitutions, unchanged throughout Don Bosco's life, list oratories, hospices, trade schools, care of vocations, the formation of rural masses, preaching to the people and the spreading of good books as special works through which the Salesians would exercise their apostolate. Foreign missions are not among them. Four General Chapters were celebrated during Don Bosco's lifetime (1877, 1880, 1883 and 1886): not one of them tabled the matter for discussion³⁴. It was the 1904 Chapter that approved a set of *Organic Deliberations* and inserted "foreign missions" in a refurbished list of activities that the Congregation would promote to reach what remained her *sole objective*: charity towards poor and abandoned youth. That is when, under the leadership of Don Michele Rua, the Society Don Bosco had founded and formed around the Oratory matures as a fully fledged Congrega-

³¹ MB X 433, 1355.

³² Giovanni BOSCO, *Storia Ecclesiastica ad uso delle scuole, utile per ogni ceto di persone*. Torino 1845, pp. 379. Edizione anastatica in *Opere Edite I*, p. 537.

³³ A. FAVALE, *Il progetto missionario di Don Bosco...*, p. 910; ID., *Le missioni nei primordi della Congregazione...*, pp. 19, 25, 45; Natale CERRATO, *Vi presento Don Bosco*. Torino, Elledici 2005, p. 240.

³⁴ Acts of General Chapters 1-4 in OE XXIX, pp. 377-472; XXXIII, pp. 1-96; XXXVI, pp. 253-280.

tion³⁵. Equally revealing is the fact that while Don Bosco in the early months of 1874 was in Rome struggling to gain his independence from the jurisdiction of the local bishop, and to achieve this he stressed the imminent expansion of the Congregation in Asia, Africa and America, he described this as “opening houses” overseas, not as starting mission work³⁶. Of mission work he began to speak – as we have seen – in 1875, at the launching of the Argentinean enterprise.

And yet the bulk of the work the Salesians were doing in America towards the end of the 19th century did not differ much from what they were doing in Europe, prompting one Don Pietro Colbachini (1845-1901), a Scalabrini missionary, to publicly raise the issue whether Salesian work in America could be called “mission work” at all, the perception being that it could not. The answer given in time would be that the typical Salesian work with the young was *another way* of understanding and undertaking mission work³⁷. Perspectives would not quickly change: in the early part of the 20th century Economist General Don Arturo Conelli was arguing in the Superior Chapter that “our Congregation is for education rather than evangelization”³⁸.

In times closer to us the Salesians could confidently state that “the Congregation was born and grew up and has always moved forward as a missionary congregation”³⁹: expressions such as this have to be understood in the light of present day debate and hence they may be taken to mean that the Congregation has always kept alive its missionary ideal. Indeed, manuals of mission history refer to Don Bosco's idea and praxis as “missionary orienta-

³⁵ Giovanni BOSCO, *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales 1858-1875*, testi critici a cura di Francesco Motto. Roma, LAS 1982, pp. 73-79; *Deliberazioni dei Capitoli Generali della Pia Società Salesiana “da ritenersi come organiche”*. Torino [1904], p. 8; *Lettere circolari di Don Rua ai Salesiani*. Torino 1965, pp. 331-334 and in particular the circular letter of 29 September 1905, *Le deliberazioni organiche canonicamente approvate*, pp. 397-399.

³⁶ *Cenno storico sulla Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales e relativi schiarimenti*. Roma, Tipografia Poliglotta della S.C. di Propaganda 1874. Con approvazione dell'Autorità Ecclesiastica. OE XXV (1872-1875) p. 250. *Positio, ibid.*, pp. 379 e 383 e MB X 945, 947.

³⁷ J. BORREGO, *Estrategia misionera de Don Bosco...*, pp. 199-201.

Pietro Colbachini (1845-1901), “classic” Scalabrini missionary, a native of Bassano (Vicenza, Italy), a man of action and ideas: with the help of a group of immigrant farmers he cleared a piece of Brazilian forest, divided the land among them and built the church. He founded the town of New Bassano (1897), of which he was founder, pastor, mayor, and promoter of agriculture, commerce, co-operatives and school. He died exclaiming: I die happy. See Silvano GUGLIELMI, *Un esodo e la sua guida. Breve biografia del beato Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, padre dei migranti, 1839-1905*. Biography on line.

³⁸ *Verbalì delle riunioni capitolarì* - 28 ottobre 1919 (Vol. IV) in ASC, D872, p. 7.

³⁹ Luigi RICCERI, *Le missioni, strada al rinnovamento*, in ACS 267, luglio 1972, p. 14. The letter is essentially a charismatic reading of the Salesian missionary enterprise, there included historical data.

tion of a non-missionary institute”⁴⁰. *Mission to the young*, as the original and primary objective, and *missio ad gentes*, an acquired field of action, now recognized as one of the Congregation’s standard works: the fact that these two elements have interacted since the debut of the overseas expansion of the Society was bound to leave a fundamental ambiguity as to which of the two and what methodology should prevail in mission lands. The tension, by no means an isolated phenomenon, would resurface also in China, where it affected the way work was conceived and developed. The two are not mutually exclusive: Don Bosco’s overseas enterprise could be seen, and was historically seen, either as the launching of *foreign missions* or the beginning of an expansion of youth work to reach *geographical universalism*⁴¹. Given the prevailing praxis of a progressive elaboration and execution of initiatives and projects rather than the pursuit of well defined objectives, as was the case also in the Society’s overseas expansion, the dilemma may, in the end, be a false one: rather than missionary expansion *or* geographical universalism it might be proper to speak of missionary expansion *and* geographical universalism. The existence of a double movement, however, is a reality and the perception of how the two work together has a bearing on our understanding of Don Bosco’s vision and enterprise also regarding China.

1.3. *The missionary call of Don Bosco: revisiting the sources*

Those who lived with Don Bosco for years and years, who heard him tell stories about his desire as a youth to go to the missions, or entertain the young with episodes culled from missionary literature, or who eyed the geography books that lay on his desk; those who packed the study hall the day he announced the acceptance of the two invitations from America, or witnessed the moving send off on that 11 November 1875 or the intensity of his zeal in organizing the new enterprise, swore that a special fire was burning in his heart: his passion for mission work, onto which he had launched his young Society and for which he had conscripted his most brilliant men, was no sudden flame; it had been burning since the days of his youth. Traditional Salesian historiography has maintained, not without reason, that Don Bosco’s missionary ideal is the natural development of an old aspiration he always

⁴⁰ Jesús LOPEZ-GAY, *Storia delle Missioni. Schemi per un corso triennale*. Roma, Gregoriana 1983, p. 94.

⁴¹ Compare the 1875 developments headlined in Ceria (“Final acceptance of the missions in South America”) in MB XI 142, with Braido’s (“Towards geographical universalism, 1875-1877”) in P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. II, p. 129.

kept alive. In Ceria's classical analysis, by no means the only one, "the missionary ideal in Don Bosco grew, one could say, together with him. At first it was an interior voice calling him to bring the Gospel to pagan lands; subsequently it became a fire of zeal, ignited by the desire to extend the activity of his sons to the mission field. This second aspiration took over from the other once he realized that the path to the Missions had been closed to him"⁴². Biographers and scholars have diligently scanned his early formative years in search of evidence in support of their intuition. However, interesting as the evidence gathered may seem it is nonetheless mostly episodic, often circumstantial and in many cases it has never been subjected to critical verification and evaluation, leaving us uncertain as to what conclusions one can accurately draw from it.

Two episodes regarding Giovanni Bosco's vocational discernment require attention. In April 1834, when still a student of humanities, Giovanni applied to join the Friars Minor at their Our Lady of the Angels convent in Turin, induced to do so by lack of financial means. He was accepted. Piedmont's Reformed Franciscans dedicated themselves to mission work in America, the Holy Land and China. Did this in some way indicate that Giovanni – in his biographer's words – "yearned for" the missions? The source of the information is Don Bosco himself, who revealed that the difficulties he had encountered in following his vocation were of a financial nature. Joining the diocesan clergy would place a considerable burden on his family, especially on his mother. This had been a major factor in his decision to seek other avenues to follow God's call. As a matter of fact he changed his mind after careful consideration of his true vocation and the advice of Don Giuseppe Cafasso, and after his parish priest, Don Antonio Cinzano, and some generous Castelnovesi offered him financial support to enter the diocesan seminary⁴³.

Some ten years later, as he was about to complete his post-ordination pastoral course at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in Turin during the years 1841-1844, just as the dream about his vocation was coming back to him, Don Bosco again found himself at a crossroad. Uncertain as to what his next step should be, he had given some thought to joining the Congregation of the Oblates of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who had just been entrusted with a mis-

⁴² E. CERIA, *Annali* I, 245. See also A. FAVALE, *Le missioni nei primordi della Congregazione...*, p. 44. A more nuanced assessment in Morand WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni tra storia e nuove sfide (1815-2000)*. Roma, LAS 2000, p. 333.

⁴³ MOE 110-118; MO 80; P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia...*, p. 45; MB I 303-304, 327-328.

sion in Burma. He had developed more than a passing relationship with the Oblates, who had a house next to the *Convitto* and had the pastoral care of *La Consolata*, the famed Turin shrine of Our Lady of Consolation. Don Bosco's resolve must have been a serious one, since he had started – perhaps at the prompting of the Oblates – to study the Spanish and English languages. When he turned to Don Cafasso for advice, his spiritual director, “discerning and farsighted in judging men”, convinced him to turn away from his purpose and showed him his field of work among the poor youth of Turin. This Don Bosco told some of his first young followers on 7 May 1861⁴⁴. The episode occurred in 1844, some three years after his encounter with Bartolomeo Garelli (8 December 1841), when his first oratory (1842) had been running for two years and before he took up his post as chaplain at the Shelter of marchioness Giulia Falletti di Barolo (September-October 1844). His biographer affirms of him – not without some rhetoric – that never “did he abandon the idea of becoming a missionary”. Almost in the same breath, though, the same biographer notes that “other ideas that kept cropping up gave him no rest”, especially the fact that “he believed and felt that he was called to the religious life”. His eventual choice is a clear indicator of his true vocation. Looking back in retrospective Don Bosco himself noted how close he had come to becoming a missionary, had he not been helped to discern what God really called him to⁴⁵.

Don Bosco found his mission in the outskirts of Turin among young immigrants: some of his friends observed how commendable his work was and comparable to that in the foreign missions⁴⁶. He was by no means indifferent to the missionary dimension of the Church, which then was going through a veritable revival under the impulse initiated by Gregory XVI (1831-1846), consolidated by Pius IX (1846-1878) and his long-serving Prefect of Propaganda (1856-1873), Card. Alessandro Barnabò, and strengthened by the climate and the discussions – rather than by concrete directives, which did not materialize – of the 1st Vatican Council (1869-1870). Don Bosco himself chronicled this revival in the 1869-1870 edition of his *Storia Ecclesiastica*: the return of the ancient orders, suppressed by the French Revolution, to mission work; the birth of new ones; the zeal of missionaries and the heroic witness of martyrs; the launching of institutions like the *Association for the Propagation of the Faith* and the *Holy Childhood*, genial in the simplicity of their organization and modern in the use of printed materials, the famed

⁴⁴ MB II 202-204. Paolo CALLIARI, *Oblati di Maria Vergine*, in DIP VI, pp. 634-637.

⁴⁵ MB II 201, 203-205; MOE 187-208.

⁴⁶ MOE 276.

Annals of the Propagation of the Faith, and extremely successful in enlisting grassroots faithful to offer spiritual and financial support to the missions⁴⁷. This fairly comprehensive description of the missionary revival of the 19th century Church, already fully under way during the pontificate of Gregory XVI, stands in sharp contrast with his woefully inadequate presentation of the phenomenon 15 years earlier, in the first edition of his *Storia Ecclesiastica*, which appeared in 1845. Gregory's eventful pontificate was then drawing to a close and yet Don Bosco shows he has only a vague grasp of his intensely missionary initiatives. All he manages is to recall, in very general and stereotyped terms, how "through his trust in God, Gregory was able to overcome all troubles, so that his subjects could live in peace, religion could triumph and the Gospel expand to the remotest corners of the earth". Of the many things that made Gregory's pontificate "glorious" he mentions his approval of three religious orders: the *Society [of Sisters] of the Sacred Heart*, the *Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus*, both French and dedicated to the education of young girls, and the *Institute of Charity*, of Antonio Rosmini⁴⁸. Of these three he notes the early expansion in mission lands. He then goes on to describe in some detail the cruel martyrdom of Charles Cornay, who worked in Indochina "for the conversion of those natives (it. *selvaggi*)" and where he died a martyr in 1837; and that of Gabriel Perboyre, missionary to China, who exercised the "sacred ministry among those barbarous nations", where he met his martyrdom in 1840. There is not even an attempt to introduce the martyrdom of the two missionaries as examples of missionary zeal and dedication: they are just "other facts that occurred during the pontificate of Gregory XVI"⁴⁹. Of

⁴⁷ Giovanni BOSCO, *Storia Ecclesiastica ad uso delle scuole, utile per ogni ceto di persone*. Torino 1871, pp. 351-356. Edizione anastatica in *Opere Edite* Torino 1871⁴, pp. [351-356].

⁴⁸ ID., *Storia Ecclesiastica ad uso delle scuole, utile per ogni ceto di persone*. Torino 1845, pp. 377-379. Edizione anastatica in *Opere Edite I*, pp. [537-537]. The *Society of the Sacred Heart* was founded by Madeleine Sophie Barat (+1865) in 1800. During the lifetime of the foundress it spread to Africa, to North and South America. The *Faithful Companions of Jesus* were founded in Amiens (France) by Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bonnault d'Houet (+1858) in 1820 and dedicated themselves to the education of children. They soon spread abroad, including England and Scotland. Also the *Institute of Charity*, founded by Antonio Rosmini (+1855) in 1828, soon sent missionaries to England (1835), considered mission land and hence under the Congregation of Propaganda. NCE XII, 697, 822-823; XIII, 262-263. Also Clemente RIVA, *Istituto della Carità*, in DIP5, pp. 133-136; Paolo CALLIARI, *Fedeli Compagne di Gesù*, in DIP3, pp. 1429-1431; Jeanne DE CHARRY, *Società del S. Cuore di Gesù*, "S. Sofia Barat", in DIP8, pp. 1683-1688. In another context the *Storia* also mentions the *Oblates of the Blessed Virgin Mary* and their mission. *Ibid.*, pp. 374 [532].

⁴⁹ G. BOSCO, *Storia Ecclesiastica* (1845)..., pp. 376-383, OE I, pp. [534-543].

Charles Cornay (1809-1837), a member of the Paris Society of Foreign Missions, meant to work in Sichuan (China) but had to settle to work in Vietnam. Arrested, he was kept in a

the two, Perboyre had particularly caught Don Bosco's attention: he reportedly used to keep a picture of him in his study⁵⁰. The fact that in this first edition of the *Storia Ecclesiastica* one finds only faint hints regarding the missions is instructive and forces us to reassess our appraisal of Don Bosco's grasp of the 19th century missionary revival during his formative years and early priesthood.

The need for a prudent reassessment is reinforced by another fact. Don Bosco read the *Annals of the Association for the Propagation of the Faith*, which were published in Italian as from March 1837. Some of his biographers wrote that he did so assiduously. We are in no position to verify that statement, but we know for sure that he borrowed from the *Annals* to compile his *Storia Ecclesiastica* both in 1845 and in 1870. Nor do we have reasons to doubt at least part of the testimony of Don Giacomo Bellia, who said or wrote that from 1848, as a young man, he used to bring copies of the *Annals* to Don Bosco in the dining room who had them read publicly and who then expressed the desire to send clerics and priests to evangelize Patagonia and the Tierra del Fuego. It is, however, highly unlikely that Don Bosco could have conceived the idea of sending missionaries to Patagonia at such an early stage. As a matter of fact, the *Annals* from 1848 to 1868 never mention Patagonia. As it often happens, Bellia's testimony is a case of unconsciously reading early beginnings in the light of later developments, a tendency that affects the objectivity of one's recollection of the past⁵¹.

Don Bosco and Canon Giuseppe Ortalda were friends, but their contacts – at least judging from references found in Don Bosco's *Epistolario* and in the Biographical Memoirs – could be best described as occasional. Ortalda was director of the diocesan council of the Association of the Propagation of the Faith from 1851 to 1880 and an active promoter of “Apostolic Schools” or

cage for three months, regularly beaten, finally beheaded and his body hacked to pieces. He was beatified in 1900 and canonized in 1988.

Gabriel Perboyre (1802-1840) entered the Congregation of the Mission in 1818 and was ordained priest in 1825. He taught theology and was rector of the seminary before departing for China in 1835 to replace his younger brother, who had died on his way before reaching China. He was denounced to the authorities by one of his catechumens, was tortured and died a martyr on 11 September 1840. In 1843 Gregory XVI directed that his cause of beatification should begin. He was beatified in 1889 and canonized in 1996. Niccolò DEL RE, *Perboyre Giovanni Gabriele*, in *Enciclopedia Sanctorum X*. Roma 1968, coll. 484-5.

⁵⁰ Giovanni Battista FRANCESIA, *Vita breve e popolare di D. Giovanni Bosco*. S. Benigno Canavese 1911⁴, p. 262. The particular is reported also in Carlo SALOTTI (card.), *Il Santo Giovanni Bosco*. Torino 1934³, p. 413, and Auguste AUFFRAY, *Un grand Educateur. Le Bienheureux Don Bosco (1815-1888)*. Paris, E. Vitte 1929, p. 409, who dates the episode 1855.

⁵¹ P. BRAIDO, *Il progetto educativo di Don Bosco...*, p. 5. The Bellia testimony in MB III 363.

minor seminaries for missionary vocations. One such school was located right next to Don Bosco's Valdocco, in the Cottolengo compound. In December 1857 Ortalda launched *L'Esposizione a favore delle Missioni Cattoliche affidate ai seicento Missionari Sardi*, a weekly propaganda and information sheet to serve a grand exhibition of fine objects collected from various mission lands. The exhibition was to climax in a lottery in support of the 600 missionaries who had sailed from the Sardinian State's shores to serve in missions around the globe. On January 1st, 1860 the *Esposizione* became the *Museo delle Missioni Cattoliche*. Don Bosco reportedly loved to read the magazine. He advertised it in 1866 in the *Letture Cattoliche* and quoted it as the source in the chapter on missions in the 1870 edition of his *Storia Ecclesiastica* and his *Nove giorni*, a booklet on devotion to Mary Help of Christians, also published in 1870⁵². But we can say with some degree of certainty that he was not a regular reader, and understandably so: he did not have the time. Though aware of the climate of missionary re-awakening in the Church, animated locally by Ortalda and friends, Don Bosco remained largely on the sideline and chose to focus on his main task of setting up the Salesian Society⁵³.

He would absorb, and to a certain degree "re-package", what helped him build or strengthen his mission among the young and his publishing apostolate. An example of how missionary events would be re-packaged to fit his priorities in animating the young is the celebration of the beatification and canonization of the Japanese martyrs. On June 29, 1867 pope Pius IX beatified a significant group of Japanese martyrs, victims of the persecution of 1617-1632. The solemn celebrations held in Rome had great resonance in Valdocco because they coincided with the Centenary of St. Peter⁵⁴. Five years earlier, on June 8, 1862, the 26 Martyrs of Nagasaki of 1597 were canonized in Rome in a particularly solemn celebration, in the presence of 43 cardinals, 5 Patriarchs and Primate, 52 Archbishops and 168 Bishops. The fact that no Italian bishop could take part, due to the interference of the Italian government at loggerheads with the Pontiff over the unity of Italy, could only serve to further arouse Don Bosco's attention. He gave the event considerable space in the third (1869-1870) edition of his *Storia Ecclesiastica*: he published the

⁵² Giovanni BOSCO, *Nove giorni consacrati all'augusta Madre del Salvatore sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice*. Torino, Tipografia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales 1870, in OE XXII, p. [333].

⁵³ In November 1859 Mgr. Luigi Celestino Spelta OFM (+1862), Vicar Apostolic of Hupei, and visitor apostolic in China, was in Turin under the auspices of the local Association for the Propagation of the Faith and visited the apostolic school in the Cottolengo compound. His visit did not extend to Don Bosco's Hospice next door. "Museo" 47 (1859) 737-739.

⁵⁴ MB VIII 862-864.

full list of the Martyrs and underlined the sufferings and witness of Anthony, a 13 year old immigrant from China⁵⁵.

After he began travelling to Rome – in 1867, the year of the centenary of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul, he sojourned for two months and visited again in 1869 and 1870 – Don Bosco had become aware of other initiatives, such as that of Mgr. Pietro Avanzini (1832-1874), of the diocese of Rome, founder of the *Acta Sanctae Sedis* (1867), founder and promoter of the *Pontifical Seminary of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul for the Foreign Missions*, an idea which had come to him in 1867, the year of the Centenary. When Mgr. Avanzini proposed a “*pia societas apostolorum*”, i.e. an association of friends willing to support the seminary by contributing funds and vocations, Don Bosco, Comboni and Ortalda were among its adherents. We do not know whether Don Bosco offered anything in concrete or whether he continued to subscribe to the association. Ortalda’s adherence was tangible and surely went further than Don Bosco’s: when the Roman seminary opened in December 1871 he contributed the first four seminarians, whom he chose from among the students of his own apostolic schools⁵⁶.

In the 1860’s and early ‘70’s Don Bosco could not afford to be swept away by the missionary fervour and the initiatives others were launching, also because he lacked the manpower. He lived those years liking what he saw taking shape in the Church, “in a climate of enquiry, biding his time, drawing up plans and weighing his chances and hopes”⁵⁷. He started testing the waters at around the time of the Vatican Council, as he began receiving offers to expand abroad. A number of other projects were coming on stream to consolidate his work: the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Association of Salesian Co-operators. Piedmont was becoming too narrow. He had one unfinished job: the approval of his Constitutions. Once this was secured, in April 1874, he moved with surprising swiftness and, as the saying goes, from then on he never looked back.

⁵⁵ MB VII 180. *Storia Ecclesiastica*, (1871), OE XXIV, pp. 358-360.

⁵⁶ AG-PIME XVI, p. 134: *Societas Principum Apostolorum, appendix II, Primis gradus rei propositae*. Romae, Typis S. Congregationis de Propag[anda] Fide 1869, gives a catalogue of all promoters. Among the promoters from abroad (*extra urbem*), on p. 4 of the pamphlet, one finds *Ioannes Bosco, Director celebris Oratorii Taurinensis S. Francisci Salesii*. Avanzini got the idea of a seminary for foreign missions in 1867, on the occasion of the centenary of St. Peter and Paul. Having secured the support of Pius IX, the seminary opened on 23 December 1871. It was officially approved on 21 June 1874 and entrusted to Propaganda Fide. Avanzini had since died. In 1926 the Roman Seminary was merged with the Milan Seminary to form the Pontifical Institute of Foreign Missions of Milan, or PIME. Piero GHEDDO, *Pime. 1850-2000: 150 anni di missione*. Bologna, EMI 2000, pp. 93-97.

⁵⁷ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia...*, p. 169.

1.4. *Calling at Valdocco*

It is somewhat comforting for us today to know that in the 25 years between 1845 and 1870 Don Bosco's perception of the missionary phenomenon grew and opened up substantially: this conclusion, though modest, tallies with the law of gradual growth and with the fact that the missionary movement in Italy began to acquire momentum in the 1850's and 1860's. In fact, while France took a leading role in the first half of the century, the Italian element grew stronger particularly in the second half. By 1864 there were 1500 Italian missionaries and 39 bishops serving in the missions⁵⁸. The Turin Diocese gradually opened up to the initiatives of the Association for the Propagation of the Faith when this was reinstated by royal decree in 1837, and perceptibly more in the late 1850's.

In 1859, when Piedmont had reached a certain collective missionary maturity with 600 missionaries engaged in the field – close to 50% of the Italian sum total – and Ortalda's initiatives were receiving an encouraging response, in an article carried in the *Museo* Don Bosco's work was seen as no more than a timely, but local service to young people in need and a seedbed of ecclesiastical vocations⁵⁹. That same year Don Bosco established the Salesian Society with the first band of disciples. The Society won the Holy See's approval ten years later, in 1869. It was at this time that it began to be seen as a possible source of services for the young outside of Italy⁶⁰. In 1869, in a situation of emergency caused by natural calamity, Archbishop Charles Martial Lavigerie (1825-1892) of Algiers turned to Don Bosco to obtain some Salesians to look after Algerian orphans. It was the first invitation Don Bosco received to help in a mission land. At that time he had not yet expanded outside

⁵⁸ Roger AUBERT - Johannes BECKMANN - Patrick J. CORISH, Rudolf LILL, *Liberalismo e integralismo tra stati nazionali e diffusione missionaria 1830-1870*. (= Hubert JEDIN [ed.], *Storia della Chiesa* VIII/2). Milano, Jaca Book 1972, pp. 312-313. Pietro CHIOCCETTA, *San Giovanni Bosco, Mons. Daniele Comboni e le iniziative missionarie per l'Africa Centrale*, "Salesianum" 50 (1988) 177.

⁵⁹ Giovanni A. RAYNERI, *Lettera al teologo ed avvocato Angelo Aymeri, missionario a Nin-po in Cina*, in "Museo" 28 (1858) 445. Father G. A. Rayneri (1809-1867), a pedagogist, head of the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy of the University of Turin, was a friend and admirer of Don Bosco. MB II 212; III 27; IV 318, 384, 438; VII 463.

⁶⁰ MB XI 408. The information reported in a letter of Daniele Comboni to Bishop Luigi di Canossa of Verona in 1865, that Don Bosco contributed "several missionaries" to the missions and "over 60 priests to the Church" every year, cannot be verified. P. CHIOCCETTA, *San Giovanni Bosco, Mons. Daniele Comboni...*, p. 180. Don Bosco mentions having contributed missionaries to the missions before he thought of organizing his own in a report to the Holy Father dated 13.04.1880, but the phenomenon is practically impossible to quantify: some may have been genuine vocations, others – documents reveal – were drifters. E III 2033.

Piedmont: he would the following year. Aware that he was not ready for such a move, he offered to accept eight Algerian orphans whom Lavigerie entrusted to his care. Some of these French speaking youngsters had difficulty in adapting to life at Valdocco and when the house in Nizza (France) opened in November 1875 they moved there⁶¹.

The following year (1870) an invitation by another great missionary to Africa, Daniele Comboni, was also allowed to fall. Comboni had previously been in Valdocco, in early December 1864, on his way back from France. He had travelled there to drum up consensus for his *Plan for the regeneration of Africa*, which he had just hatched. In Turin, through the assistance of Canon Ortalda, he had it printed by Falletti, the same firm that printed the *Museo*. Comboni shared his ideas with Don Bosco and it seems it was in Valdocco that he retouched the *Plan*, presenting it as the fruit of a sudden, unexpected inspiration from above. On that occasion he spoke to the young about the challenges of the emancipation of the black continent and his zeal and enthusiasm created quite a stir among them⁶². Comboni had made a fundamental option for the redemption of Africa and was totally dedicated to his mission. It was a huge task that required the participation and cooperation of all forces in the Church. And so he tried to get also the “Saint of Turin”, as he called Don Bosco, on board. In September 1869 and again on July 3, 1870 Comboni wrote inviting him to send two or three priests and four or five brothers to run an institute in Cairo to work alongside his missionaries. Comboni had just presented a new document, his *Postulatum pro Nigris Africae Centralis* (or *Petition for the evangelization of Central Africa*), to the Council Fathers in Rome and had sent Don Bosco a copy. His invitation came with an offer to entrust – in due time – a Vicariate Apostolic to the Salesians and allow them to “be gradually grafted into Central Africa”. Don Bosco instructed his deputy, Don Michele Rua (1837-1910), to reply and discuss the matter with Comboni. Don Rua answered that for the time being they were unable to provide personnel but that they would willingly cooperate by accepting at Val-

⁶¹ MB IX 472; P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. II, p. 133; E(m) III, 1448; IV, 2204, 2207.

⁶² MB VII 825-826. P. CHIOCCETTA, *San Giovanni Bosco, Mons. Daniele Comboni...*, p. 178.

Michele Rua (1837-1910) met Don Bosco as a young boy. He was among the small group of youngsters who met in 1854 to start the Salesian Society. He professed privately the following year and grew to become Don Bosco's most faithful helper, working at his side from 1865 onwards. In 1884 pope Leo XIII made him vicar of Don Bosco, whom he succeeded as Rector Major in 1888. During his rectorship the Salesians went to China (1906) and Salesian houses in the world grew from 64 to 341. He was beatified in 1972.

docco any young people whom Comboni might wish to introduce, a type of solution – incidentally – which Comboni himself had already given up as inadequate⁶³.

The Ortaldas, the Combonis, the Lavigeries came and went, but Don Bosco persisted in going his way. That may well have to do with his search for an independent path to development, as well as with his peculiar experience of work among the young, which would result in *a unique* path to mission, one somewhat dependent on his youth and his work among them. As he was busy at work in developing his Society and the various initiatives inextricably linked with it, he began to “dream” of the possibility of expanding to mission lands. He did not have the personnel yet, nor did he have a strategy, but Comboni’s plan had given him some ideas to work on...

1.5. *The turning point: the Vatican climate*

After the Comboni visit in December 1864 other visitors called in at Valdocco. On September 1, 1867 “a Reformed Franciscan bishop from Central China, born in Bologna, visited the Oratory. He was given a cordial reception by the boys and the brass band, and showed he was quite pleased with the new church [of Mary Help of Christians] and the Oratory”. Don Bosco, who had gone out for the day, probably did not get to meet him. It was Don Rua who entered the event in the chronicle he had just inaugurated, but forgot or did not record the name of the bishop: he was Mgr. Eustachio Vito Modesto Zanoli OFMRef (1831-1883), Vicar Apostolic of Hupei. From what we know his was no more than a courtesy call⁶⁴.

In 1870 Mgr. Domenico Barbero (1820-1881), Vicar Apostolic of Hyderabad (India), who hailed from Foglizzo and was a good friend of Don Bosco, asked Don Bosco if he had any sisters to send to his Vicariate and was introduced to the Institute of the Sisters of St. Anne and of Divine Providence⁶⁵. By the very presence of 180 bishops from mission lands, the Vatican

⁶³ MB VIII 187-189 and MB IX 711, 888-889.

⁶⁴ MB VIII 922. Bishop Eustachio Vito Modesto Zanoli OFMRef was born in the diocese of Modena (no Reformed Franciscan bishop born in Bologna served in China during these years) in 1831, joined the China mission in 1856, succeeded Mgr. Luigi Celestino Spelta OFM as Vicar Apostolic of Hupei in 1862 and was assigned to the Eastern portion upon its division in 1871. He died in 1883. *Hierarchia Catholica* VIII, p. 257.

⁶⁵ MB X 626, 658. Mgr. Barbero was consecrated in Rome first bishop of the Seminary of Foreign Missions of Milan in April 1870 while attending the Council. He returned to Hyderabad with six sisters of St. Anne, all of them diploma holders, on 3 March 1871. P. GHEDDO, *Pime...*, pp. 319-320.

Council had considerably boosted the visibility of foreign missions in Italy. Bishops from North America, Africa and Asia had taken advantage to recruit clergy and sisters. Some of them travelled all the way to Turin. Mgr. Giuseppe Sadoc Alemany OP (1814-1888), archbishop of San Francisco, began negotiating with Don Bosco in July 1870 to open a trade school and hospice. The negotiations were interrupted for unknown reasons⁶⁶. Unnamed bishops approached Don Bosco during his stay in Rome⁶⁷. The Biographical Memoirs record that “on the occasion of the Vatican Council” two bishops from China visited Valdocco: Mgr. Luigi Moccagatta OFMObs (1809-1891), Vicar Apostolic of Shantung, and from 27 September 1870 of Shansi, a native of Castellazzo di Alessandria. With him was Mgr. Eligio Cosi OFMObs (1819-1885), from 1865 his coadjutor, and from 29 September 1870 appointed his successor as Vicar Apostolic of Shantung. According to Don Francesco Dalmazzo, who recalled the visit years later without recording the date, the two had specifically come from Rome to explain the great need of missionaries suffered in those lands⁶⁸. From Rome Comboni had sent Don Bosco a copy of his *Postulatum*, followed shortly thereafter by the proposal we already know about.

The missions were being debated at the Council by an *ad hoc* commission, but the draft document *Super Missionibus Catholicis* was not brought before the assembly and so nothing came out of it. Unanswered remained such important issues as the formation and promotion of indigenous clergy and the setting up of local churches, which the Holy See encouraged⁶⁹. Don Bosco had been in Rome while the Council was in progress. During the papal audience he was granted on 8 February 1870 Pius IX disclosed that the bishops of Parma and Mondovì had reported on the Salesian Society to the Council Fathers, who were interested in models of religious life adapted to an

⁶⁶ Michael RIBOTTA, *The road not taken*, in “Journal of Salesian Studies” 2 (1990) pp. 54-55. E(m) III, 1448, 1452. Episodic evidence shows that lack of personnel may have played its part in aborting the plan, due to start either in spring or fall of 1871. AME 20, 807.

⁶⁷ MB IX 834.

⁶⁸ Luigi Moccagatta OFMObs (1809-1891) arrived in China in 1840, was consecrated bishop in 1844 as episcopal pro-vicar of Shantung and Vicar Apostolic in 1848. *Hierarchia Catholica VII*, 402; Eligio Cosi OFMObs (1819-1885), from Pontassieve in Tuscany, had been a missionary in China since 1845. *Hierarchia Catholica VIII*, 470; MB IX 891.

Francesco Dalmazzo (1845-1895) was ordained in 1868 and professed in 1869. He was rector of Valsalice (1872-1880), rector of S. Cuore in Rome and Procurator General (1880-1887), founder of the Salesian House in London (1887) and rector of St. John Ev. in Turin (1888-1894). He died in tragic circumstances while helping the bishop of Catanzaro.

⁶⁹ A. FAVALE, *Le missioni nei primordi della Congregazione Salesiana...*, p. 29-44; A. LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, p. 95. Jean COMBY, *How to understand the history of Cristian Mission*. London, SCM Press 1996, p. 212.

increasingly secularized world⁷⁰. Invitations, visits and requests increased perhaps as a result of this unexpected propaganda, since many of the bishops from mission lands approached him. The following year – as we know – Don Bosco sought the advice of Pius IX on whether he should consider these invitations. The Society, approved in 1869, had yet to secure the approval of its Constitutions. Besides, with a mere 26 perpetually professed priests, Don Bosco included, 8 in temporary vows and 6 houses to run in 1872, he could hardly afford to send 6-8 Salesians to the missions as, for instance, Comboni had asked⁷¹.

In September 1873, while Don Bosco was working on the text of the Constitutions to win Rome's approval, Father Timoleone Raimondi (+1894), of the Milan Seminary, Prefect Apostolic of Hong Kong, on his way to Paris and London in search of an Institute willing to help him run the Catholic schools in his Prefecture, passed through Turin and took up lodging at Valdocco. He had not meant to, but soon he started discussing and negotiating a deal under which Don Bosco would send his Salesians to take over the Hong Kong schools. The persistence with which Don Bosco pursued the deal and the swiftness with which soon thereafter, when the plan failed to materialize, he decided to go to Argentina, suggest he felt he was finally ready for an overseas move.

2. Negotiations with Timoleone Raimondi for a house in Hong Kong (1873-1874)

Raimondi needed to quickly find a community of Religious Brothers to run the Mission's male schools: the two Benedictine priests who in January 1873 had taken charge of Catholic education wanted to leave because of his refusal to entertain their request that, besides taking care of education, they be assigned a public church where they could exercise the sacred ministry. The two monks, the Rev. Swithbert Palmer OSB and the Rev. Aidan Macdonald OSB, had left the care of a parish in Belgium to help the Hong Kong Prefec-

⁷⁰ MB IX 810-811.

⁷¹ *Società di S. Francesco di Sales anno 1872*, in OE XXIV, pp. 489-498. Altogether there were 103 professed Salesians and 86 novices. Also MB IX 888-889. According to an 1880 report, in 1872 Don Bosco for the first time discussed with Card. Barnabò the possibility of sending missionaries abroad. There is no documentary trace of this; besides, that year Don Bosco did not enjoy good health and did not travel to Rome. The 1880 report was written in Rome, possibly without archival support. E III, 2033.

ture Apostolic education programme on an experimental basis, but Raimondi – not known for easily giving up his ideas – argued that they had been called specifically to run schools and hence he would not budge, fearing that the hard-won “unity and harmony” in the Prefecture might be jeopardized. In this he had the support of Propaganda, in keeping with the then prevailing principle of *jus commissionis*, which granted exclusive rights in evangelization to the Religious Order to which a territory had been assigned. Raimondi had taken the government ‘secularized’ school system head-on and had won the right to provide Catholic education to Catholic expatriate and Chinese children, on condition he employed at least two English native teachers. Teaching Brothers were the preferred solution, because they could not, and hence would not ask to, exercise the sacred ministry. Finding Brothers to come to Hong Kong, however, was easier said than done: education was very much in demand and, unless the Holy See stepped in with a word of recommendation, it was nearly impossible to obtain anyone. Raimondi fancied the Christian Brothers, “Brothers of Christian Doctrine” as they were called then: he had been informed that they had opened a novitiate in England and so he was confident that they would be able to provide the two English brothers he needed. Besides they were already present in Indochina. Contacts had been made early on, in April 1872. To obtain their services, he had enlisted the help of Propaganda, of the Nuncio in Paris and, of course, of his own Superior in Milan. But since the Christian Brothers’ reply had been consistently negative, he was ready to settle for the Marist Brothers, or the Xaverian Brothers of Ghent, Belgium: the Xaverian Brothers, he noted, “have good teachers and are to a greater extent subject to the Ordinary than the Brothers of Christian Doctrine”⁷².

⁷² *Giovanni Timoleone Raimondi* (1827-1894) joined the Milan Seminary and was ordained a priest in 1850. From 1852 he worked in Melanesia and Labuan. In 1858 he was transferred to Hong Kong and in 1868 was elected pro-Prefect Apostolic and Procurator of Propaganda. When the Prefecture was elevated to Vicariate Apostolic in 1874, Raimondi became its first Vicar Apostolic. Strong in character but extremely capable and energetic, he is considered the founder of the Hong Kong mission. He fought for the right to establish Catholic schools and inspired the formation of an indigenous association of “virgins”, which would become an autonomous congregation in 1922: the Sisters of the Precious Blood. P. GHEDDO, *Pime...*, pp. 463-480.

Unless specifically indicated otherwise, the details of this Part 2 on Raimondi’s negotiations with Don Bosco have been gleaned from the following, extensive sources: APF, *Cina e Regni Adiacenti* (1873-74) Vol. 25 and AG-PIME, AME 16. On this topic see also HA SEONG KWONG - L. E. KEELON, *The Foundation of the Catholic Mission in Hong Kong, 1841-1894*. Doctoral Thesis, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 1998, pp. 147-148; Sergio TICCOZZI, *Il Pime e la perla dell’oriente (Hong Kong)*. Unpublished work. Archivio Generale Pime, Roma 1999, p. 52.

2.1. *Raimondi at Valdocco*

En route to France he made a stopover in Turin and was lodged at the Oratory. Here he saw what Don Bosco was doing, liked what he saw, and got an offer from him to send his Salesians to Hong Kong. They talked it over and Raimondi, there and then, prepared a draft agreement on paper with the letterhead of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales⁷³:

“Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales
Torino

1. L' educazione della gioventù maschile cattolica di Hong Kong si affida alla Congregazione del Sac. D. Giovanni Bosco.
2. Avranno l' intera amministrazione degli stabilimenti maschili colle facoltà necessarie per la direzione spirituale dei giovani. In quanto alle altre opere del ministero si presteranno qualora il Prefetto Apostolico o chi ne fa le veci lo richiegga.
3. Avranno cappelle private nei loro stabilimenti. Confesseranno e predicheranno nelle chiese pubbliche qualora fossero richiesti dal Prefetto.
4. Potranno formare nuovi stabilimenti d' accordo col Prefetto Apostolico. In quanto a sottoscrizioni o collette per gli stabilimenti si metteranno pure d' accordo col Prefetto Apostolico o chi ne fa le veci.
5. Il profitto e perdita che ne venisse dagli stabilimenti sarà interamente a carico loro.
6. L' educazione avrà di mira di formare buoni secolari.
7. Avranno di mira di avere sempre due o tre maestri inglesi.
8. Nel collegio e scuole per gli Europei si insegnerà Inglese, Portoghese, Francese e Chinese, la matematica, geografia, storia, fisica. Nell' orfanotrofio o riformatorio per Chinesi avranno arti e mestieri.
9. Il Collegio sarà tenuto nobilmente. Per la classe povera europea potranno formare un orfanato.

[Pref. Apost.
Raimondi]”

Both seemed keen to strike a deal, but at this stage the discussions could only have been exploratory in nature. Raimondi went on to Paris and on September 30 informed his Superior in Milan, in admiring words, that he had met Don Bosco in Turin and had held talks with him:

“Viddi a Torino Don Bosco. Che uomo! direi che Santo! il fine dei suoi Sacerdoti è l'educazione della gioventù proprio quello che sarebbe necessario a Hong Kong. Concordiamo nelle idee e se non riesco coi fratelli sarei inclinato a prendere i discepoli di Don Bosco con qualche giovane Inglese. Che ne dice Lei di Don Bosco e dei suoi? Per ora basta, non vi è più carta”⁷⁴.

⁷³ Original in HKDHA V-23-02.

⁷⁴ Raimondi to Marinoni 30.09.1873, in AG-PIME, AME 16, 1403.

On October 6 he also wrote to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide to inform him that the Superior of the Cristian Brothers was absent and that after 15 days in Paris he had received no clear and conclusive answer. The Brothers would love to work in Hong Kong but had no personnel available. Raimondi hence announced he would go to Bruges, to see what could be obtained from the Marist Brothers, and from there to England, to try to convince Abbot Wilfred Alcock OSB to keep the Benedictines in Hong Kong at least until he had found a replacement⁷⁵. At this point he introduced his dealings with Don Bosco, specifically requesting the opinion of the Roman Congregation:

“A Torino ho conosciuto il Rev. D. Bosco, uomo straordinario, il quale udendo che V.E. desiderava che io trovassi qualcheduno per le scuole e orfanotrofio, mi offrì subito i suoi: mi aiuterebbe anche nelle spese, e la sua Congregazione ha per fine propriam[ente] quello che io avrei bisogno si facesse a Hong Kong. Ha dei fratelli artisti bravissimi; mancherebbero però d’Inglese; a questo si potrebbe supplire col trovare qualche giovane Inglese, che volesse unirsi a loro e venire a Hong Kong. Coi fratelli verrebbe qualche sacerdote, ma per quello che intesi da Don Bosco non domanderebbe Chiesa a sé, come i Benedettini.

Desidererei sapere sopra ciò l’opinione di V. E. Nulla fu concluso finora, ma non sarebbe difficile venire ad una conclusione. Abbia V. E. la bontà di scrivermi sopra ciò, e diriga la lettera al Seminario des Miss[i]ons Etrang[eres] [de] Paris”⁷⁶.

Card. Alessandro Barnabò, head of Propaganda, promptly replied on 14 October, authorizing Raimondi to deal with Don Bosco:

“In pronto riscontro della lettera direttami da V.S. in data del 6 corrente debbo significarle che da parte di questa S. Congregazione non esiste nessuna difficoltà a che Ella accetti per la Missione di Hong Kong i soggetti che Le sono stati offerti dal Rev. Sacerdote D. Bosco. Si apparterrà poi a Lei di giudicare se abbiano questi tutte le qualità necessarie per disimpegnare con frutto quegli uffici, che Ella intende loro affidare, ed in questo caso di prendere col detto sacerdote tutti gli opportuni concerti, sia riguardo alle spese di viaggio, sia su tutte quelle che concerne la loro destinazione nella Missione di Hong Kong”⁷⁷.

Barnabò’s letter reached Raimondi in London. There he also received a communication, from his Institute’s headquarters in Milan, the contents of which he referred to the Cardinal in a letter dated November 13:

⁷⁵ The Rev. Wilfred Alcock OSB, Abbot of St. Augustine’s, Ramsgate (England), was “Visitor” of the Anglo-Belgian Province of the reformed “Congregazione Cassinese”. APF, Acta 1875, n. 243, f. 374; AG-PIME, AME 16, 345.

⁷⁶ Original in APF, Cina e Regni Adiacenti (1873-1874), Vol. 25, p. 545r-v; draft in HKDA II.5.06; copy in AIC, Hong Kong.

⁷⁷ Original HKDA II.5.05; copy in AIC, Hong Kong.

“Ho l'onore di accusare ricevuta della lettera di V.E. che mi pervenne qui a Londra. Nello stesso tempo ricevetti una lettera dal mio Seminario di Milano, e da quella appare che il Superiore del Seminario [Mons. G. Marinoni] non ami che io entri in trattative con quello del Rev. D. [Sig.?] Bosco. Non amando di far cosa contraria ai desideri dei miei superiori, mi astengo. Ma chi trovare?”⁷⁸.

The Superior of the Milan *Lombard Seminary for Foreign Missions* in Via S. Calogero, hence the name ‘Fathers of S. Calocero’, was Mgr. Giuseppe Marinoni. The letter to which Raimondi refers, and which presumably was a reply to Raimondi’s letter of September 30, could have been written by Fr. Giacomo Scurati on behalf of his Superior⁷⁹. Scurati handled Marinoni’s correspondence especially in the final months of 1873 and the early months of 1874, when the Superior was plagued by severe eye problems. The letter should have been in Hong Kong together with other papers of Raimondi, but it has been found neither in Hong Kong nor elsewhere, leaving us in the dark as to why Marinoni objected to the negotiations. Personal antagonism or lack of trust should be excluded. In April 1882 Marinoni visited Don Bosco in Turin in an attempt to secure personnel for Mgr. Eugenio Biffi (+1896), who was being transferred to Cartagena in Colombia and who badly wanted the cooperation of Salesian priests, only to find him absent from home⁸⁰. He held Don Bosco in high esteem, at least in so far as we can gather from the letter of condolences he wrote to Don Rua on the occasion of Don Bosco’s death and from other correspondence⁸¹. Marinoni’s letters offer some clues as to plausible reasons, but the real motive was, in part at least, a general policy the Institute applied in Hong Kong of denying other religious Orders the possibility of engaging in pastoral work in order to ensure unity and harmony. Some years later Raimondi, who in obedience to such dispositions had refused the services offered by the Jesuits and the Dominicans, would complain

⁷⁸ Raimondi to Propaganda from London 13.11.1873. Original in APF, Cina e Regni Adiacenti (1873-74), Vol. 25, p. 598r-v; minute in HKDA II.5.06: the letter is not among the Raimondi papers. Marinoni and Scurati left minutes only of official letters.

⁷⁹ *Mgr. Giuseppe Marinoni* (1810-1891) is co-founder of the Lombard Seminary, later PIME, with Mgr. Angelo Ramazzotti, and its first Superior, a position he held for 41 years (1850-1891) steering the Institute through its first, critical period. *Giacomo Scurati* (1831-1901), a former missionary to Hong Kong and secretary of Mgr. Luigi Celestino Spelta OFM, apostolic visitor of the China Missions (June 1860 – September 1862) succeeded Marinoni at the helm of the Institute (1891-1901). P.GHEDDO, *Pime...*, pp. 77-114.

⁸⁰ AG-PIME, AME 07, 343, 345, 433 and AG-PIME 21, 993. On Biffi, P. GHEDDO, *Pime...*, pp. 669-673.

⁸¹ Marinoni to Rua 4.2.1888 in ASC A0410440. Also Marinoni to Cagliero 28.7.1881 in ASC A0200139.

to his Superior about the negative effect, i.e. the much good that could have been done had they agreed to the request⁸². A second reason may well have been the fact that the position of the Milan Fathers in Hong Kong was far from secure: they had assigned only five missionaries to work in the Prefecture and could easily feel at a disadvantage next to a fast growing religious Congregation like the Salesians. Had Don Bosco sent a community of 6-8 Salesians, what comparisons would be drawn? They were not unreasonable fears: when news broke that a Vicariate Apostolic would be erected in Hong Kong, bishop Patrick Moran of Ossory (Ireland), wrote to Rome suggesting that an English speaking Vicar Apostolic would be preferable in such a strategic place, right at China's door⁸³. And so, when Raimondi managed to get six Christian Brothers for Hong Kong, he made sure the number of his missionaries increased to nine. Whatever the actual reason, we know for sure that the Superior's veto became, as we shall see, a source of embarrassment to Raimondi, who had to disengage Don Bosco as diplomatically as possible. And not to him alone, but later also to the Milan Fathers when in 1927 they welcomed the Salesians in Hong Kong: in 1929 they kindly provided authenticated copies of the Raimondi papers regarding his negotiations with Don Bosco, minus two: the letters that contained references to the Superior's veto.

On November 25 the Secretary of Propaganda replied to Raimondi in the following terms:

“Ebbero la Sua del 13 Novembre scrittami da Londra. Si è ben governata nell'interrompere la corrispondenza con D. Bosco di Torino, per avere i Maestri, giacchè ciò sembra non piacere al R. D. Giuseppe Marinoni”⁸⁴.

The Secretary could afford the advice. In fact he had a piece of good news for Raimondi: he had spoken with the Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Brother Philippe Bransiet, and had found him ready to discuss the possibility of sending English Brothers to Hong Kong⁸⁵. He could then discontinue his negotiations with the Marists and take advantage, while in France and before returning to Rome, to discuss pertinent matters with the Christian Brothers. Meanwhile Raimondi, before he could receive

⁸² Raimondi to Marinoni 13.06.1878 AG-PIME, AME 17, 235-238 quoted in S. TICCOZZI, *Il Pime...*, p. 112.

⁸³ Marinoni to Propaganda 12.05.1874 in APF, *Cina e Regni Adiacenti (1873-74)*. Vol. 25, f. 1000.

⁸⁴ APF Lettere e decreti della SC, Biglietti Mons. Segretario (1873), vol. 369, p. 567v.

⁸⁵ During the long generalate of Bro. Philippe Bransiet (1838-1874) the Brothers experienced rapid growth and expansion, especially in the years up to 1850. J. R. LANE, *Christian Brothers*, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, III. New York, McGraw-Hill 1967, p. 631.

the good news, fretted because of his inability to find a Congregation ready to commit itself without delay. His November 26 report to his Superior contained a respectful, but clear word of complaint. He wrote:

“Vi sono tre Congregazioni che dicono che facilmente potranno venire dopo due anni. Ma finché io non ho qualche cosa di sicuro io non posso partire. *La unica pronta è quella del Rev. Bosco e mi rincresce di vedere difficoltà anche per questo*”⁸⁶.

Between the end of November and the beginning of December Raimondi again vented his frustration, as he wrote to his Superior in a somewhat polemical tone on an undated half sheet of paper:

“[...] intanto andremo a Lione a trattare colla Propagazione e coi Fratelli Maristi. Batti di qua, batti di là qualcosa verrà fuori. Ma finora, buon Superiore, io debbo dire che se non vi è che una Congregazione che sia pronta questa è quella del Sac. Bosco. Non sarebbe questo un segno che è chiamata per l' opera nostra? Il Sac. Bosco è un santo, e si guadagna sempre ad attaccarsi ai Santi. La lingua (e la penna) battono dove il dente duole, non è vero?”⁸⁷.

If Raimondi's comments were intended to remove the objections of the Superior, the letter did not achieve its goal. But when he received the good news from Propaganda and felt he was finally out of the woods, he no longer insisted. All he needed now was to find a way to tell Don Bosco that his offer was no longer needed, without letting him know that the negotiations had been interrupted at his Superior's prompting.

2.2. *Don Bosco in Rome for the approval of the Constitutions*

Meanwhile, at the end of December, Don Bosco had arrived in Rome seeking the approval of the Constitutions of the Salesian Society and stayed at Via Sistina 104, in lodgings provided for him and his secretary by co-operators Alessandro and Matilde Sigismondi. At 11am on January 5th he was received in private audience by pope Pius IX. On a little scrap of paper he had annotated the various things, 24 items in all, that he wanted to ask about or discuss with the Holy Father, mainly favours for his benefactors. The number 14 item regarded “The house of Hong Kong” and number 15 the “Affairs of the Society”. This scrap of paper contains the first Salesian reference to the negotiations: so far, in fact, our source has been Raimondi's correspondence

⁸⁶ Raimondi to Marinoni 26.11.1873 in AG-PIME, AME 16,1412-3.

⁸⁷ Raimondi to Marinoni, undated, *ibid.* 1416.

with either Propaganda or his Institute. That same day, January 5th, Don Bosco wrote to Don Rua and all the residents of Valdocco describing the audience and confirming having spoken “about Hong Kong”⁸⁸. The topic of Hong Kong would come up again in the correspondence of the following days and weeks.

Don Gioachino Berto’s diary informs us that on January 6th and again on January 9th Don Bosco was received by Monsignor Giovanni Simeoni (1816-1892), Secretary of Propaganda Fide. On the latter date Berto penned the following entry: “Card. Barnabò, Prefect of the Missions, expressed the desire to see Don Bosco; however he said he would go [to see the cardinal] after having spoken with Mgr. Raimondi”⁸⁹. From this we reasonably infer that the two had arranged to see each other and that Don Bosco wanted to get the latest information on the Hong Kong negotiations to share with the head of Propaganda. On January 11th Don Bosco wrote again to Don Rua with a string of tasks to entrust to him and there, in no particular order, he asked Don Rua to “tell Don Savio to prepare to sanctify himself in order to go and sanctify those of Hong Kong”. Had he thought of sending Don Angelo Savio (1835-1893), the Economer General, as leader of the first overseas expedition, or was he merely trying to keep interest in the planned venture alive⁹⁰? On January 15th after lunch – Berto wrote – “a number of persons went in to speak to Don Bosco. Thereafter we went out and headed for the Ministry of Justice. On the way we spoke about Hong Kong”. On January 19th evening, as Don Bosco and his trusted secretary were walking towards the Vatican, they came across Monsignor Simeoni, “who would like to give us a mission all by ourselves”. On January 23 they had lunch “at home”, meaning at Via Sistina. “After lunch came Mgr. Raymond [sic], Prefect Apostolic of the Mission of Hong Kong”.

On January 18th Raimondi had accompanied a group of missionaries – a priest, three sisters and two Irish students – to Marseille as they prepared to

⁸⁸ ASC, A2210604; E(m) IV, 1883.

⁸⁹ Gioacchino BERTO, *Appunti del viaggio di D. Bosco a Roma nel 1873-74*, p. 7, 12, 14 in ASC A0040403.

Gioacchino Berto (1847-1914) was for over two decades Don Bosco’s private secretary. In such capacity he accompanied Don Bosco on his travels. He is also known for his numerous ascetic writings. Eugenio VALENTINI – Angelo RODINÒ (edd.), *Dizionario biografico dei Salesiani*. Torino 1969, pp. 38-39.

⁹⁰ E(m) IV, 1892.

Angelo Savio (1835-1893) was elected first Economer General in 1859 and again in 1869 and 1873. In 1875 he was assigned to supervise several construction works, including the Basilica of S. Cuore in Rome. In 1885 he left for S. America: in one of his dreams in 1861 Don Bosco had seen him working in very remote regions. E. VALENTINI – A. RODINÒ (edd.), *Dizionario biografico...*, p. 255.

sail for Hong Kong. The following day he left for Rome. Whatever Raimondi told Don Bosco on January 23 was not of a conclusive nature, such as for instance that he had already found the personnel he was looking for and therefore no longer needed Don Bosco's services: the two, in fact, agreed to meet again a few days later. But what Raimondi wrote to his superior the following day is quite revealing. He informed him that the Brothers of the Christian Schools had promised Card. Barnabò that they would send teachers to Hong Kong. Then he added:

“Don Bosco travaglia perché accettiamo i suoi. Credo che non convenga per ora. Quindi se venisse a Milano non concludino niente con D. Bosco”⁹¹.

Raimondi apparently did not know how to tell Don Bosco, who was quite keen to send his Salesians to Hong Kong, that he could not take up his offer. And so he thought it prudent to alert his Superiors in Milan in case Don Bosco, who was having a hard time finding suitable personnel, approached them. On January 26th evening – Berto again informs us – Raimondi visited Don Bosco a second time. Again the contents of the conversation are not known, but he very likely told Don Bosco that it was essential he provide English speaking teachers; they also talked about possible ways to recruit them, with Raimondi suggesting Don Bosco turn to either the English or the Irish College, as he himself had done through Propaganda Fide years earlier⁹², and in all likelihood agreed to postpone the signing of an agreement pending the solution of the language problem. From what we know, the two never met again. The question of the language was an objective one, but Don Bosco had reasons to believe that they were genuinely seeking a solution and that consequently his project to send the Salesians to Hong Kong was still on track. The ensuing chain of events is enlightening.

2.3. *Switching to plan B*

The following day, January 27th, Don Bosco and his trusted secretary visited Mgr. Tobias Kirby (1803-1895), Rector of the Irish College in Via Magnanapoli⁹³. Kirby extended a lunch invitation to the two for the following

⁹¹ Raimondi to Marinoni 24.01.1874 in AG-PIME, AME 16, 1446-7.

⁹² On 9 September 1873 Raimondi had sought the good offices of Propaganda Fide to obtain two teachers for Hong Kong. APF, *Cina e Regni Adiacenti (1873-74)* Vol. 25, 457v.

⁹³ Mgr. Tobias Kirby was one of Don Bosco's great friends in Rome. Born in Ireland in 1803, he was rector of the Irish College in Rome for 50 years and eventually became an influential adviser to Propaganda Fide. In 1881 he was appointed titular bishop of Lete and in 1886 he was promoted titular archbishop of Ephesus. He died in Rome in 1895. HC VIII, p. 260, 340.

Sunday. On Sunday, February 1st, the two were guests at Kirby's. The problem of the English speaking staff was certainly broached. On Saturday, February 14th, Don Bosco was again received by the Holy Father and the difficulty, together with a proposed solution, regarding English speaking instructors came up for discussion. The complications Don Bosco was facing are echoed in an obscure remark contained in a letter to Don Rua dated 17th February and containing the usual task list:

“Da pure il biglietto a [Giuseppe] Rossi, ma digli che io temo che colla cessione del Gran Can comprometta la Missione di Hong Kongh [sic] che appartiene al suo impero”⁹⁴.

On Sunday, February 22nd, Don Bosco and Don Berto were again at Mgr. Kirby's for lunch, after which “Don Bosco spoke to two young Irishmen, a priest surnamed Liston and a deacon surnamed Hallinan, about their coming to Turin to be formed for two or three years in order to educate young Irishmen for the missions”. That was the plan, to have the two young Irish clergymen stay with him in Valdocco and help form vocations from the English speaking world, a need that became even more pressing and clear a few days later when he met Fr. Giovanni Bertazzi, who worked in the United States, with whom he would soon engage in talks to send Salesians to Savannah, and in summer yet another round of negotiations was started with Bishop Matthew Quinn (+1885) of Bathurst to form missionaries to send to Australia⁹⁵. The idea had already been suggested by Raimondi during the

⁹⁴ Don Bosco to Rua 17.02.1874 in MB X 773; E II, 1166; E(m) IV, 1914.

Giuseppe Rossi (1864-1908) was a well known lay brother in Valdocco, trusted by Don Bosco and often mentioned in the *Memorie Biografiche*. What Don Bosco wrote about imperial “cession” in China remains unclear: had he heard from Raimondi about the problem of “succession” within the imperial dynasty and the repercussions this might have on Hong Kong? Emperor Tung-chih acceded to the throne in 1861 at the age of five and took over power in 1873 only to die suddenly in January 1875 at the age of eighteen leaving no heir. Throughout his reign and the decades that followed effective control remained in the hands of his mother, Empress Tsu-hsi. Meanwhile Hong Kong was locked in a protracted dispute with the viceroy of Canton over the levying of taxes on opium smuggled into China by Chinese vessels based in Hong Kong, which damaged the portion of trade controlled by local interests. See Johnathan D. SPENCE, *The search for modern China*. New York, Norton 1991, pp. 194, 204, 216-217; G. B. ENDACOTT, *A history of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong, Oxford University Press 1973², pp. 187-194.

⁹⁵ *Giovanni Bertazzi*, an Italian priest working in the United States, had asked Don Bosco to help run a school in Savannah (USA). In April 1874 he wrote a proposal. The deal did not go through. E(m) IV, 1936, 1956; MB X 1359-1371.

Matthew Quinn (1820-1885) studied at the College of Propaganda in Rome. He was first Vicar General of the diocese of Hyderabad (India), vice-President and then President of the Seminary of St. Lawrence in Dublin and from 1865 bishop of Bathurst in Australia. HC, VIII, 106. See also MB X 1269-1272.

Turin encounter and had won the support of Pius IX. Fathers Thomas Liston and Denis Hallinan eventually went to Turin not long thereafter. In early June they went back to Ireland on holiday with a letter written by Don Bosco in Latin authorizing Hallinan to recruit young Irish vocations for Valdocco⁹⁶. The plan did not work out: the young men, some twenty in all whom Fr. Hallinan had recruited, expected to be housed and trained in comfortable lodgings, like Valsalice for instance, and wanted to be free on completion of the training course to opt for whatever mission they chose and not necessarily to become Salesians, as Don Bosco wanted. Don Bosco, Bishop Quinn pointed out, “was not in a position to give security of permanence for the projected institution”, meaning a general missionary college that would attract young men from Ireland to be trained for the missions⁹⁷. The main reason could well be another: Don Bosco had put the plan of preparing personnel for the English speaking missions on the back burner, since he was working on another idea. In mid June, in fact, he had met Mr. Giovanni Battista Gazzolo, Argentinean consul in Savona; at the end of August Gazzolo had sent letters to the Archbishop of Buenos Aires suggesting he invite the Salesians to man the Italian church of the Mother of Mercy.

Back in Rome, in February: Don Bosco was not having an easy task in securing the approval of the Salesian Constitutions. The Hong Kong connection seemed like a godsend: since he was struggling to obtain the faculty of issuing dimissorial letters, i.e. granting permission for clerics in his care to be ordained to the priesthood, an essential condition to operate as a religious Society in different countries and dioceses, he “played up” the invitations he was receiving from abroad. Believing that his negotiations with Raimondi were still on track, in March Don Bosco drafted a letter to pope Pius IX asking for the faculty to open some houses in Italy and overseas:

⁹⁶ E(m) IV, 1965, 1974; MB X 1372. The Hallinan letter mentions the consent of Pius IX for the plan. An incorrect interpretation of this letter induced the biographer to wrongly conclude that Don Bosco, at that stage, had received also the papal consent to open houses abroad. See MB X 1272.

Dr. Denis Hallinan (+1923) returned to Ireland and engaged in parish work. He became bishop of Limerick and in 1919 welcomed the Salesians in his diocese. *Thomas Liston* also returned to Ireland to begin parish ministry in Ballingary, Co. Limerick, and thereafter disappeared from the story. William John DICKSON, *The dynamics of growth. The foundation and development of the Salesians in England*. Roma, LAS 1991, p. 41.

⁹⁷ E(m) IV, 2010; W. J. DICKSON, *The dynamics of growth...*, pp. 37-41. Regarding the failure of the experiment Don Bosco lamented the unsuitability of the subjects – Cronichetta, ASC A0000103, p. 67 – while to Kirby he also mentioned financial difficulties. W. J. DICKSON, *The dynamics of growth...*, pp. 39-41. E(m) IV 2017, 2020, 2036.

“Il Sac. Giovanni Bosco, Superiore della Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales, prostrato ai piedi di V.B. espone umilmente che avrebbe presso che concluse le trattative per aprire:

1. Una casa pei poveri fanciulli cattolici dell’ isola di Hong Kong nella China;
2. Un Ospizio con scuole in Savannah nell’ America;
3. [...] un istituto di carità nella città di Genova [...];
4. Un collegio [...] nel paese di Ceccano⁹⁸.

Sebbene le intelligenze finora tenute abbiano avuto luogo direttamente coi rispettivi Ordinari diocesani, tuttavia secondo le Costituzioni Salesiane non potendosi nè aprire, nè assumere l’amministrazione di nuove case senza il consenso della S. Sede, umilmente ricorre a V.B. implorando le opportune facoltà”⁹⁹.

The letter is undated. All we have is the original unsigned draft kept in the Salesian Archives: the original letter was not found in the Vatican Archives, where it normally should be, had it been delivered. It is quoted in the Biographical Memoirs and in Ceria’s *Epistolario* in relation with a papal audience Don Bosco *supposedly* had in March, on the sole basis of a note, a memorandum written in Don Bosco’s own hand on a scrap of paper entitled *Udienza Marzo 1874*. It is the only piece of evidence we have regarding the “audience”, which seemingly never took place. As we have seen Don Bosco had already been granted two previous audiences, on January 5th and on February 14th respectively. Don Berto’s diary does not mention the March audience. The note or memorandum does not give the date when the audience occurred and its contents were largely repeated in the memorandum for the audience of March 12th the following year¹⁰⁰. The pope granted Don Bosco another audience on April 8th, soon after the approval of the Constitutions. In the end the letter may have never been delivered, but the idea behind it is clear: as the approval of the Salesian Constitutions hung in balance, Don

⁹⁸ Neither the Ceccano nor the Genoa negotiations yielded any results. Gioachino BERTO, *Breve notizia del viaggio a Roma 1876*, pp. 3-4, in ASC A0040501. On Don Bosco’s trip to Ceccano see G. BERTO, *Appunti del viaggio...*, pp. 62-63 and E(m) IV, 252, n. 1936.

⁹⁹ MB X 784; E II 1187

¹⁰⁰ Berto mentions a letter destined for the pope, which he delivered on March 20: “Venerdì 20 [marzo]. Al mattino Don Bosco col Conte Filippo Berardi visita ad un locale della Certosa da lui comperato che vorrebbe affittarlo a D. Bosco. *Io a S. Pietro a portar una Storia d’Italia a Mons. Negrotti con una lettera del Papa da consegnarsi in proprie mani*”. We have no way to say it was our undated letter. Equally the idea that “Don Bosco aveva già il consenso del S. Padre per aprire nuove case all’estero”, as mentioned in MB X 1272, has no basis in documents and could have been inferred, wrongly, from the Hallinan letter. The pro-memoria for the 12 March 1875 audience, which Ceria largely disregards (see MB XI 115), is found in ASC A2210608.

Bosco wanted to impress the Holy Father that he needed the faculties to issue dimissorial letters.

This same idea turns up in various other documents submitted to the Roman Congregations in the months of February and March. Don Bosco had drafted a *Summary Historical Exposition*, which he edited according to the suggestions of Prof. Carlo Menghini, his lawyer, and had printed on February 26¹⁰¹. The document must have been particularly urgent and important, if Don Bosco did not celebrate Mass on that day in order to finish the work. The final chapter of his exposition dwells precisely on the issue of dimissorial letters, noting how the Congregation, with 300 members engaged in ministry outside the Turin archdiocese, needed to be able to move autonomously in order to function. This is where the Hong Kong negotiations became helpful:

“Ora si sta trattando colla Sacra Congregazione di Propaganda Fide di aprire case e scuole cristiane pei fanciulli dell’isola di Hong-Kong nella China e *si verrà alla definitiva conclusione* appena, che la Clemenza del benemerito Sommo Pontefice avrà concesso il sospirato favore della definitiva approvazione di questa Pia Società Salesiana”¹⁰².

At the same time Don Bosco had finished drafting the *Positio*, again with the help of his curia lawyer. He submitted it on March 7 to the Cardinals assigned to the *Particular Congregation* that would have to vet and approve the Constitutions¹⁰³. The concluding part is actually a Summary, the *Riassunto della Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales nel 23 febbraio 1874* (or *Resume of the Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales of 23 February 1874*), which deals with the Society’s present situation vis-a-vis Ecclesiastical authorities, local bishops and civil society. It also lists the various houses and oratories of the Congregation. At the end the latest developments are highlighted:

“Presentemente: al presente *sono conchiuse le trattative* per aprire case pei ragazzi cattolici dell’isola di Hong-Kong nella China, e per un orfanotrofio nella città di Genova”¹⁰⁴.

Judging from the evidence available, Don Bosco asserted with startling nonchalance that the “negotiations had been concluded”: did he mean that

¹⁰¹ Prof. Carlo Meneghini (+1896), Roman Canon and Curia lawyer. Friend of Don Bosco and of the Salesians, he helped draft numerous documents to be presented especially to the S. Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. In 1878, at the height of the Gastaldi controversy, he was replaced by C. Leonori.

¹⁰² *Cenno storico sulla Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales e relativi schiarimenti...*, MB X 954; OE XXV, (1872-1875), p. 250.

¹⁰³ MB X 762-763.

¹⁰⁴ MB X 947; OE XXV, (1872-1875), p. 383.

nothing needed to be added to the negotiations, and it was just a matter of waiting for certain conditions to be verified? Certainly it could not be taken to mean that he had signed a contract for the opening of the houses, because he had not. On the other hand Don Bosco is well known for inflating figures of members and pupils to underscore a point. In his count he would include also the projected growth, mixing the virtual with the real, and this specific case is no exception: he was at pains to impress Rome that his Society was growing numerically and expanding geographically and hence he needed the final approval¹⁰⁵. Propaganda Fide knew that the door to Hong Kong was now closed to Don Bosco but chose to keep silent on the whole thing. Don Bosco wrote again to the Cardinals of the commission on 18 March clearly stating, among other things, that the Society was expanding, negotiations to open houses in “America, Africa and China were practically concluded”, the members had reached 330 in number and the pupils 7,000, and hence he needed the final approval of the Salesian Constitutions¹⁰⁶. The *Positio* was discussed on March 24 and 31 and the Society obtained definitive approval on April 3, 1874.

Coincidentally, the previous day (April 2) Raimondi was able to write to his Superior that the Christian Brothers had formally accepted to go to Hong Kong: “after so much ado, Deo gratias”¹⁰⁷. While Don Bosco left Rome soon thereafter quite satisfied for having secured the final approval of the Constitutions and the faculty to issue dimissorial letters for 10 years, Raimondi travelled to Paris to sign the contract with the Christian Brothers, then returned to Rome because of important, unfinished business: on 28 September 1874 the Apostolic Prefecture of Hong Kong was erected into a Vicariate Apostolic, and on 22 November Raimondi was consecrated as its first Vicar.

2.4. *The old version as told in the Biographical Memoirs*

So we now know the reason why Don Bosco’s negotiations with Raimondi were left suspended. What shall we say, then, of the version transmitted to us by the Biographical Memoirs? This is how the ‘facts’ are narrated in connection with the dream of 1871-1872 on Patagonia, which Don Bosco revealed for the first time in 1876:

“Then I thought of Hong Kong, and when Monsignor Raimondi, who was a missionary there, came to Turin to find recruits, *I did for a time enter into ne-*

¹⁰⁵ E(m) IV, p. 18.

¹⁰⁶ E(m) IV, 1946. In 1874 the members were exactly 251. MB X 1231.

¹⁰⁷ Raimondi to Marinoni 2.4.1874, in AG-PIME, AME 16, 1521.

gotiations with him, but they led nowhere because he wished to impose restrictions on our Congregation. In particular he wanted to stipulate that whatever our Congregation might acquire as gift or purchase should become mission property. For some time I thought that those islanders were the savages I had seen in my dream, but after some research I realized that my dream resembled neither the land nor its inhabitants. The attempted negotiations forced me to study new regions, but in vain”¹⁰⁸.

The dream about Patagonia has come to us in two versions, one from Don Giulio Barberis, written in 1876 shortly after he heard the narration from Don Bosco, and the other from Don Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, who wrote after 1883¹⁰⁹. The text we find in the Memoirs is a combination of the two accounts, the result of the “cumulative” method of blending the information from different sources into a single narrative. Don Bosco reviewed neither the two independent versions nor the combined one. The paragraph about Hong Kong quoted above is a further *late addition* to the Lemoyne combined version and should be treated with caution: it could, in fact, contain information stemming from both Don Bosco and Lemoyne, with certain words directly attributable to the former and integrations provided by the latter. It is not easy to tell where Don Bosco ends and where Don Lemoyne takes over. The sentence “*I did for a time enter into negotiations with him*”, and especially the original Italian “*per un istante mi lasciavi andare a trattative con lui*”, reflects fairly accurately the way Don Bosco approached the negotiations with Raimondi, and hence could be words heard from him. That the negotiations never reached crucial intensity we derive from other contemporary sources, and specifically the Barberis *Cronichetta*, which tell us that Don Bosco treated this as one of several “projects” which did not materialize¹¹⁰. But the

¹⁰⁸ BM X 544.

¹⁰⁹ *Giulio Barberis* (1847-1927) entered the Oratory in 1861, professed in 1865 and was ordained in 1870. He was a confidant of Don Bosco, with whom he was in constant contact from 1874 to 1879: he collected facts and words of Don Bosco in a series of *Cronachette*, widely used by biographers and especially by Lemoyne for his *Biographical Memoirs*. He helped Don Bosco write a *Memoir* on Patagonia, for which he used history and geography books sent by missionaries.

Giovanni Battista Lemoyne (1839-1916) was ordained priest in a diocese before becoming a Salesian in 1865. He was rector of Lanzo and a capable formator. In 1884 he was called to Turin as secretary of the Superior Chapter and was in charge of collecting documents – he collected 45 volumes known as *Documenti* – for a history of the Congregation. He published several books, among whom a life of Don Bosco and the first eight volumes of the Biographical Memoirs between 1898 and 1912: the 9th volume was published posthumously in 1917.

¹¹⁰ *Cronichetta*, 6 December 1875, copied in *Documenti* 15, A064, reported with a different slant in MB XI 408.

sentence: “[...] because [Raimondi] wished to impose restrictions on our Congregation. In particular he wanted to stipulate that whatever our Congregation might acquire as gift or purchase should become mission property [...]” could well be an integration by Lemoyne on the basis of the fact that Don Bosco consistently resisted being tied to conditions that he knew did not favour the development of his enterprises. The documents, especially the draft contract Raimondi prepared, tell the precise opposite, i.e. that the Salesians could keep whatever income from the operation of the school for the development of the same. Even Raimondi’s deal with the Christian Brothers was quite generous in its financial arrangements, and was criticized as such by his confreres.

2.5. *Change of direction: to Argentina*

In dealing with the Holy See to obtain the approval of the Salesian Constitutions Don Bosco never mentioned plans or even the possibility of going to Argentina. He started considering that possibility only in June 1874. We should not be misled, in fact, by the impression of what he wrote to the Committee Members of the San Nicolás Boarding School on December 25 of that same year:

“Corrono quattro anni dacché sono in familiari relazioni con S. E. il sig. comm. Gio. Battista Gazzolo console argentino in Savona, e spesso i nostri discorsi erano rivolti alla potente e vasta Repubblica, e nominando specialmente la città di S. Nicolás come centro di altri punti, centro di commercio, i cui cittadini vengono segnalati per moralità, buon volere e zelo per la buona educazione della gioventù”¹¹¹.

This is one of those texts where past and present blend together and hence it needs to be read carefully: to borrow terminology dear to Scripture scholars, time here is conceived not some much as “*chronos*”, the chronological unfolding of human events, as “*kairos*”, the period of grace granted by God. What the text actually says is that Don Bosco first met Gazzolo some time after March 1870, when he took up the post as consul general in Savona and the Salesians opened a house in Alassio. Gazzolo being from Argentina, it is not surprising that they discussed matters relating to that nation, which then was attracting immigrants from Italy. The fact that Don Bosco used to travel often to the Riviera, especially after the house of Varazze was founded in

¹¹¹ Don Bosco to San Nicolás, 25.12.1874, E(m) IV, 2049.

1872, may have given the two more than one chance to meet. Gazzolo was in friendly terms with Don Giovanni Battista Francesia¹¹², the rector of that house. But for all this Don Bosco was not particularly well acquainted with him: suffice to say that in his 1874 correspondence – hence after 4 years he had been “familiar” with him – he referred to him as Carlo, not Giovanni Battista Gazzolo. And, yes, they did discuss San Nicolás de los Arroyos. But that was in mid-December 1874, days before Don Bosco wrote to the San Nicolás board, when their October-November 1874 invitation to take over the boarding school reached him. How did Don Bosco know so much about the town? Don Ceccarelli, the parish priest, had provided the information: what Don Bosco writes in his letter is, after all, but a summary of what Ceccarelli had written to him. In other words, this text reveals Don Bosco's familiar style, his clever ability to create empathy at the start of his dialogue with the members of the Founding Committee of San Nicolás, who were offering him the management of a school on very advantageous terms, “without a time limit”, and possibly opening for him the door to important developments in the field of the missions.

So, while Don Bosco had been on friendly terms with Gazzolo for some time already, the story of the first foray across the ocean did not actually begin till the middle of 1874. That is when Don Bosco was still trying to figure out how he could send his Salesians to Hong Kong. If doubts persist, we need not look further than the Barberis *Cronichetta*'s entry for 12 May 1875, where it states that “about a year earlier the Argentinean Consul [...] had contacted the Archbishop of Buenos Aires”¹¹³. This brings us back to the month of June. On June 9, 1874 Don Bosco wrote a letter of introduction for Fr. Denis Halinan, who was going back to his native Ireland, a letter dated *Turin*, but likely written from Sampierdarena. On June 9, in fact, and part of

¹¹² *Giovanni Battista Francesia* (1838-1930) was one of the first 16 pupils whom Don Bosco assembled in 1859 to form the Salesian Society and was the first Salesian to obtain a doctorate in literature. Among his pupils was Dominic Savio. In 1865 he joined the Superior Council as Spiritual Director of the Society. He was rector of several houses, including Varazze, and provincial of Piedmont-Lombardy from 1878-1902 and for a while also of Veneto. He wrote dozens of books and pamphlets.

¹¹³ “Dopo le orazioni il Sig. D. Bosco parlò della missione di Buenos Aires. Da circa un anno il console Argentino, Commendator Gazzolo di Savona avendo conosciuto il Sig. D. Bosco a Varazze, e conosciuto lo spirito della Congregazione ne fece parola in America a Buenos Aires coll'Arcivescovo e molti reverendi i quali si mostrarono entusiasti pei Salesiani e bramaronò che una loro colonia andasse a trapiantarsi nelle loro regioni”. *Cronichetta*, ASC A0000101, p. 9. Also Don Francesia, while giving the wrong year – 1875 instead of 1874 – confirms that the negotiations did not start earlier on. G. B. FRANCESIA, *Vita breve e popolare...*, p. 263.

the following day he was visiting that house. On the 10th he was in Varazze and on the 12th in Alassio. Don Bosco visited Liguria several times during 1874, the first time shortly after his return from Rome. It was very likely that he met Gazzolo on his second visit, between the 9th and the 12th of June: these dates fit with the developments that ensued. The conversation focused on the possibility of ministering to Italian immigrants in the church of the Mother of Mercy in Buenos Aires. Wanting to have a better understanding of the place, Don Bosco asked the consul to provide him with some books on the Argentinean capital. In July he was at Lanzo for the annual retreat. In early August he planned to meet Gazzolo in Mornese, but Gazzolo did not turn up. On August 30, Gazzolo wrote to the Archbishop of Buenos Aires to introduce Don Bosco and his work: the letter accurately describes the Society, the details provided – presumably – by Don Bosco or Don Francesia. By separate dispatch he sent the Archbishop a catalogue of the *Letture Cattoliche*. On September 10, the consul wrote to Antonio Espinosa, Secretary General of the Archdiocese¹¹⁴. Espinosa's favourable reply to Gazzolo is dated October 10, while Ceccarelli's letter to Gazzolo signalling he welcomed the Salesians in San Nicolás is dated October 26. Both letters reached Gazzolo in November. A second letter from Ceccarelli, this time announcing an advantageous contract, is dated November 11 and was delivered a month later¹¹⁵.

These are the letters that Don Bosco got from Gazzolo in mid December, when he again visited the houses on the Riviera, and that he had in hand when he returned to Turin on December 19th. On the basis of these letters by December 22, hence in a matter of days, he decided that the Salesians would go to Argentina. From Don Bosco's correspondence we know that between December 11 and 19 he visited Nizza, Alassio and Sampierdarena. No mention is made of Varazze, but he surely visited there, and there – we have to believe the belated Varazze “Chronicle” for this – Don Bosco met Gazzolo, received the letters, was briefed and – presumably – exchanged ideas and information¹¹⁶. Don Bosco prepared a reply for Mgr. Espinosa which he dated December 22, the very day he announced his decision to the Superior

¹¹⁴ MB X 1263-1266; E(m) IV, 2035; the first of Gazzolo's letters in A. M. GONZALEZ, *Origen de las Misiones Salesianas...*, pp. 90-92.

¹¹⁵ The letter of Ceccarelli to Gazzolo dated December 2, the three documents and two letters for Don Bosco he attached, one from himself and one from Committee President Jose Benitez, arrived after the new year. It took one month for letters to travel from Argentina to Italy.

¹¹⁶ E(m) IV, pp. 361-364; Varazze “Chronicle” in ASC F940. It is actually not a chronicle of the 1874 events, but rather of the 1931 events, when a plaque was placed in the dining room to commemorate the meeting between Gazzolo and Don Bosco.

Council, and letters to Ceccarelli and the San Nicolás Committee, both dated 25 December. He sent them to Gazzolo, who received them on the 27th and who intended to forward them to Argentina by the French postal ship departing January 8, after Don Bosco had made certain corrections: he had, among other things, referred to Giovanni Battista Gazzolo by a wrong first name, as already mentioned¹¹⁷. The news was subsequently communicated to the Rectors on 28 January and to the entire Valdocco community on the following day.

Why the speed? The doggedness with which Don Bosco chased the unlikely chance of going to Hong Kong and the speed with which he decided for Argentina suggest that he considered the Society ready to branch out overseas. The paths he pursued to go to Hong Kong were leading nowhere. Now a new avenue opened before him that seemed promising and within immediate reach:

“[...] several Missions were proposed to us in China, India, Australia, and elsewhere in America. But for a number of reasons, and especially since our Congregation is just starting, we selected a mission in South America, in the Argentine Republic”¹¹⁸.

These are the reasons Don Bosco gave during the farewell speech to the departing missionaries on 11 November 1875. The first step across the ocean was in itself challenging enough even without the addition of cultural differences or the difficulty of a totally unfamiliar language. By opting for Argentina he was choosing a less steep path for his first missionaries. This much we have from Don Bosco: for the rest we have to reconstruct, because the accounts of what actually occurred during those months of important decision-making is not always clear or consistent with fact. The possibility and attraction of a mission to unidentified “savage tribes” possibly beckoned to him during the mid-December Varazze meeting with Gazzolo or subsequent briefings by him, when Don Bosco, having received an invitation to go to San Nicolás, enquired about the whereabouts of that town. The expression “savage tribes” begins to appear and becomes familiar from the time of the announcement of the project, in late January 1875. The perceived proximity

¹¹⁷ The Biographical Memoirs offer an unclear, even contradictory account of these events. Gazzolo reportedly *visited* Turin towards the end of 1874 “to officially ask him to set up institutes in Argentina...”. MB X 1273. Elsewhere it says that Gazzolo *sent* the documentation to Don Bosco, “who read it to the Superior Chapter the evening of December 22”. MB X 1302. Braido and Desramaut affirm that Don Bosco got the entire documentation from Gazzolo while journeying between Alassio and Sampierdarena.

¹¹⁸ MB XI 384.

of San Nicolás with the tribes gave him the possibility of testing the method he had learnt from Comboni, a method that, suitably adapted, would allow him to put to full advantage the experience he had built up at Valdocco in the attempt of branching out to mission work: educate young tribesmen in his boarding schools and send them back to evangelize their own people.

3. China in Don Bosco's dreams, anxieties and words

That was the strategy he was mulling over by day and – possibly – dreaming of by night. In fact there was also a dream, the dream of 1871-1872, to which we briefly referred in connection with the Raimondi negotiations.

3.1. *The dream of 1871-1872 and its paradigmatic value*

This is Don Bosco's first 'missionary dream', about throngs of savage natives who kill the missionaries, hacking them to pieces and brandishing chunks of their flesh on the barbs of their long spears, followed by the arrival of a group of Salesian missionaries led by a band of young boys, rosary beads in their hands, advancing cheerfully towards the hordes, by whom they are warmly welcomed and who readily accept the missionaries' admonitions¹¹⁹. A "vision", according to the Biographical Memoirs, that convinced Don Bosco to launch his missionary apostolate in Patagonia: God was showing him the way in a clear, detailed way¹²⁰. Contemporaries who lived the Valdocco experience harboured, and perhaps fuelled, supernatural expectations: in fact, even before Don Bosco mentioned the dream, Barberis observed him "speaking all the time about America", leading him to surmise that Don Bosco had received some "revelation from the Lord"¹²¹.

While acknowledging that Don Bosco believed the dream to be a true omen, historians nowadays are less inclined than former generations of chroniclers and biographers to think it was precisely this dream that made him decide for Patagonia, or that it offered clear indications of future paths¹²². Don Bosco had to go through a long and tentative process of discernment before he could effectively establish a link between dream and reality as he

¹¹⁹ MB X 54-55.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 1267.

¹²¹ *Cronichetta*, 02.02.1876, p. 47. ASC, A0000104.

¹²² P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia...*, p. 169. F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps...*, p. 968 and footnote n. 111.

gradually came to perceive it, and as such under constant review. The first overseas destination was Argentina, and the decision was taken on the basis of practical considerations. The allure of Patagonia emerged gradually, from a variety of factors unconnected with the dream. In Don Bosco's mind Argentina and Patagonia were separate realities and the riverside town of San Nicolás del los Arroyos only gradually became – in his plan – the base for launching forays among the Patagonian “savages” roaming the wild 300km away¹²³. Barberis affirms that the dream “later” made Don Bosco “think [...] about the *Patagonian* missions”. When he decided for Argentina, on 22 December 1874, he may have entertained vague ideas about the existence of unspecified native tribes in the general vicinity of San Nicolás garnered from his conversations with Gazzolo. Uncertainty about the land and its savage inhabitants prevails for most of 1875: in his conversation with the Holy Father, in April 1875, Don Bosco spoke of Buenos Ayres, not of Patagonia¹²⁴. The first, vague references to Patagonia are in a letter to a benefactor dated 25 September, the speech of 11 November, and shortly thereafter in a letter to the Association for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyon: as already mentioned, the Association had refused him a subsidy on the ground that the Salesians were heading for Argentina, not for mission lands, to which Don Bosco replied that their “primary aim” was actually Patagonia and the Pampas¹²⁵.

So, when the Pampas and the Patagonians made their first appearance, the decision to accept Buenos Aires and San Nicolás was already one year old. And it would take another six months, in mid 1876, for the Patagonian project to become conviction. That is when the dream of 1871-72 surfaced. The first to hear it was pope Pius IX during a later audience among the three he granted Don Bosco in April-May 1876. Discussion about the Patagonian project, rejected by the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, was central to the decision of revealing the dream to the pope. Don Bosco next told it to Don Francesco Bodrato on July 30, who in turn confided it to Don Barberis. Three days later Don Bosco narrated the dream to Barberis himself, who immediately put it into writing with the benefit of having heard it twice within days.

¹²³ Don Bosco to Franchi 10.05.1876, E III, 1453. San Nicolás actually lay some 600km from the northernmost border of Patagonia. The Pampas, who inhabited the land north of Patagonia along the Rio Negro and Rio Colorado, were somewhat nearer. Still in 1880 Don Bosco described San Nicolás as being “at a short distance from the savages”, “the last Argentinean town bordering with the Pampas”. E III 2033; MB XIV 623-636.

¹²⁴ Don Bosco to Gazzolo, 10.4.1875, E(m) IV, 2112.

¹²⁵ E(m) IV, 2187, 2227. He solicited financial help also from Propaganda, E(m) IV, 2178; E III 1485; Don Bosco to Costamagna, quoted in P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia...*, p. 180.

Don Bosco did not make a note of his dream, but indicated that it had occurred “between four and five years earlier”, i.e. in 1871 or 1872. Internal evidence suggests it could have been in late 1873, “since at that time – Barberis records Don Bosco saying – I was negotiating with Mons. Raymondi [sic] regarding the Mission of Hong Kong”. The dream, therefore, occurred in the years after the Vatican Council, when requests and visits from missionaries were becoming more frequent, the Salesian Society experienced sustained growth and Don Bosco began to concretely think of the possibility of branching out abroad. In this scenario, the nocturnal dream – far from being a sudden vision – is seen as the natural development of Don Bosco “day-dreaming”, as his thoughts started to spill over into the night¹²⁶.

Don Bosco confessed to having given scant attention to the dream at first, but then, over the years, he thought about it and wondered whether it had anything to do with Daniele Comboni’s proposal of 1870, or the negotiations he was having with Timoleone Raimondi (1873-74) regarding Hong Kong. How on earth could he think that Hong Kong was populated by man-eating savages dressed in animal skins is difficult to imagine: had he read the *Museo delle Missioni Cattoliche*, he should have known better, for there one finds an 1858 description of a vibrant, commercially active and well organized Colony. By the same token he would have also found a description of the Patagones and of the Fueghini not unlike the one he later came across¹²⁷. Be things as they were, he next came to suspect that the dream might refer to the visit of Bishop Matthew Quinn of Bathurst in Australia, from whom he specifically inquired about the characteristics of Australian natives. Mgr. Quinn had been in Turin in summer 1874 to discuss the possibility of entrusting to Don Bosco the formation of young people from Ireland to be destined to missions where the English language was dominant¹²⁸. This is as

¹²⁶ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. II, p. 129; Arthur LENTI, *Introductory Essay*, in Eugene M. BROWN (ed.), *Dreams, Visions & Prophecies of Don Bosco*. New Rochelle 1986, p. xlix.

Francesco Bodrato (1823-1880), a widower and primary school teacher from Mornese, was accepted by Don Bosco as a member of the Salesian Society. Ordained priest in 1869, he worked as a teacher and, briefly, as economer general. In 1876 he left for Argentina as head of the second missionary expedition and was put in charge of Salesian institutions in Buenos Aires. Plagued by ill health, he died at the height of a civil war that ravaged the capital. See Francesco BODRATO, *Epistolario*. Introduzione, testi critici e note a cura di Brenno Casali. Roma, LAS 1995.

¹²⁷ “Museo” 18 (25 aprile 1858) 281-283.

¹²⁸ MB X 1270. In July 1875 Don Bosco asserted to having accepted a Mission in Australia. E(m) IV, 2155. As late as December 1875 Don Bosco entertained the idea of accepting mission work in Australia, with Mons. Quinn. *Cronichetta- Barberis*, ASC A0000103, pp. 36-37.

much as Barberis heard from Don Bosco: Lemoyne's version is far more elaborate, but not for this is it more reliable. The reference to Mgr. Quinn brings us up to the time when Don Bosco was in contact with Gazzolo and got an unsolicited invitation from San Nicolás de los Arroyos. Don Bosco, eager to know more, asked Gazzolo for some books "on Buenos Aires", but they were not quite what he was looking for. He eventually got the books he wanted from the missionaries of his first expedition and, based on those, in May 1876 he prepared a first report on Patagonia for Card. Franchi of Propaganda Fide. Upon returning from Rome, he commissioned Barberis to write a more complete report for the cardinal. It was ready by mid August¹²⁹.

At this point the research thoroughly convinced him that what he had seen in the dream was Patagonia and its native inhabitants, and we detect in Don Bosco possibly the clearest perception that he had found the mission land that God had shown him. Hardly able to contain his excitement, on August 13 he wrote memorable, if somewhat over-elated lines to Don Cagliero regarding the project and the effects of his promotion of the same:

"Sono circa 200 che dimandano andar in Patagonia. Tutta l'Italia e l'Europa politica e religiosa parla del nostro progetto per la Patagonia. Dio lo vuole, e ci voglia aiutare a fare la parte nostra"¹³⁰.

As we mentioned, at first Don Bosco felt disinclined to give the dream much attention, nonetheless the impression it had left on him was so vivid that he felt he could not disregard it altogether, "because my previous experience persuaded me that what I had seen would come true". The conclusions of his determined search left him "in no doubt as to the land towards which [he] should direct [his] thoughts and efforts"¹³¹.

This first of five "missionary dreams", according to some authors at least, had considerable resonance in the history of the Congregation. For Don Bosco it came to mean a call to evangelize native peoples and it provided him with an intuition, or perhaps a confirmation, of a new method of evangelizing by educating the young. The dream fired up Don Bosco's action and resolve and had deep and certainly not fleeting repercussions in the troubled history of the Vicariate Apostolic of Patagonia. For more than one generation Patagonia became a by-word of missionary call and enterprise in the Salesian

¹²⁹ E III 61-62, 1455. Giovanni BOSCO, *La Patagonia e le Terre Australi del Continente Americano*. Introduzione e testo critico a cura di Jesús Borrego. Roma, LAS 1988. Regarding the books Don Bosco used, cf *ibid.*, pp. 9-16 and A. DA SILVA FERREIRA, *Due sogni sulle missioni della Patagonia...*, pp. 104-105.

¹³⁰ Don Bosco to Cagliero, 13.8.1876, E III 1483.

¹³¹ MB X 1268-1269.

world. Its undeniable charismatic contents stimulated the energy of missionaries and inspired their self-confidence as they faced a host of problems¹³². And yet this, as the other dreams, never really solved Don Bosco's problems: he had to find the way, secure the means and surmount the obstacles¹³³. Understandably, the main protagonists in the mission field – Giovanni Cagliero, Giuseppe Fagnano, Francesco Bodrato, Giuseppe Vespignani, Luigi Lasagna – were perplexed and held divergent views on what to make of this and other dreams: Cagliero, the more down-to-earth among them, considered them as “ideals”, while Vespignani, faithful to the detail, would consider them as indispensable step by step guidelines¹³⁴.

The 150 odd dreams contained in the Biographical Memoirs¹³⁵ have not been seriously studied in a systematic way. The text of only ten dreams – those that have been either written or personally corrected by Don Bosco and a few others – have been subjected to critical scrutiny¹³⁶. It is not the aim of this essay to delve into this problem area in detail, but the dream of 1871-72 shares a common, double hurdle with most other dreams, including those about China, viz. *textual tradition* and *interpretation*.

Two accounts of this dream have reached us in manuscript form. These two texts served as the basis for the new “cumulative” version produced by the biographer, the *versio recepta*. The earlier, shorter version is undoubtedly closer to the facts and was put into writing by Don Barberis immediately after he heard it: written in the first person and dated 31 July 1876 – it may have actually been written shortly thereafter – it has the freshness and the immediacy of a dream's account. The second, longer version was penned by

¹³² A. DA SILVA FERREIRA, *Due sogni sulle missioni della Patagonia...*, pp. 101, 103; Id., *Patagonia, realtà e mito...*, pp. 11-12; M. WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni...*, p. 238.

¹³³ Alberto CAVIGLIA, *Don Bosco: profilo storico*. Torino, SEI 1920, p. 73.

¹³⁴ A. DA SILVA FERREIRA, *Due sogni sulle missioni della Patagonia...*, p. 102.

Giuseppe Vespignani (1854-1932) moved to Valdocco shortly after his ordination in 1876. He remained one year with Don Bosco, which he described in his *Un anno alla scuola di Don Bosco* (1930) and then departed for South America as master of novices with the third missionary expedition. He led a very active life as rector in Buenos Aires and Provincial. In 1922 he was elected to the Superior Chapter as councillor for professional and agricultural schools. E. VALENTINI – A. RODINÒ, *Dizionario biografico...*, pp. 293-294.

¹³⁵ The dreams are 120 for Desramaut, in Francis DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco and the spiritual life*. New Rochelle, Don Bosco Publications 1979, p. 34; “not less than 153” (193 is a typo) for J. De Vasconcellos, in José DE VASCONCELLOS, *Don Bosco sognò Brasilia?*, in C. SEMERARO (ed.), *Don Bosco e Brasilia...*, p. 132.

¹³⁶ Critical textual studies of dreams: Cecilia ROMERO, *I sogni di Don Bosco*. Edizione critica, presentazione di Pietro Stella. Torino, LDC 1978 (for the dreams written or corrected by Don Bosco, ten in all). A. LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, pp. 85-130 (for the missionary dreams); A. DA SILVA FERREIRA, *Due sogni sulle missioni della Patagonia...*, pp. 101-139 (for the dream of 1871-1872 and that of 1883).

Don Lemoyne. Internal evidence compels us to date its redaction not earlier than 1883-1885, when the Vicariate Apostolic of Patagonia was finally established. In it, in fact, we see an obviously battle-weary Don Bosco, who relishes the chance to reminisce about the uphill fight he had to wage to convince Roman doubters of his Patagonian projects, only to be proved right by facts: a sense of satisfaction emerges from the account, which appears somewhat overstated and sometimes factually wrong¹³⁷. This eclectic document, a *post factum* reading of the events, contrasts with the Barberis version, which, being closer to the source, is less likely to be polluted by later additions or interpretations and hence is a more reliable record of Don Bosco's oral narrative¹³⁸.

The interpretation of this dream is even more challenging. Few people today would insist that Don Bosco's dreams in general were plain "visions" without further qualification. Already back in 1936 Don Eugenio Ceria distinguished "dreams that were not really dreams; dreams that were nothing but dreams; and dreams of a revelatory character"¹³⁹. Even in dreams of a "revelatory character" one can easily assume the presence of a human element, the fruit of human psychology, and a revelatory one, supposedly coming from above, the two mingled together. Don Bosco himself was concerned about these issues. Telling the two apart is not easy. And even when one believes he has successfully isolated possible revelatory elements, how does one determine their precise relevance and meaning? In the case of the dream of 1871-72, what conclusions can one draw considering that, as we have seen, it did not substantially come about the way Don Bosco thought it would, both regarding the target (the Patagonian "savage" tribes) and the method of evangelization (colleges for young "savages")? Was Don Bosco's endorsement of the Comboni plan historically contingent? What is the dream's relevant part:

¹³⁷ The Lemoyne version casts Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò (1801-1874) as critic of the Patagonia project. Barnabò died in Rome on 24 February 1874, while Don Bosco was awaiting an audience from him. The Patagonia project was discussed in 1876. Opposition came from Barnabò's successor, Cardinal Alessandro Franchi (1874-1878), who preferred the Salesians accept a Vicariate Apostolic in China. A. DA SILVA FERREIRA, *Due sogni sulle missioni della Patagonia...*, p. 116; MB XII 192.

¹³⁸ Typical of this "eclectic" approach is the following sentence, taken *verbatim* from a May 12, 1875 entry – hence before Don Bosco narrated the dream – in the Barberis *Cronichetta*: "Finalmente nel 1874 il Console Argentino a Savona..., avendo conosciuto Don Bosco e lo spirito della Congregazione Salesiana, ne fece parola in America coll'Arcivescovo di Buenos Aires e a molti sacerdoti, i quali si accesero di entusiasmo per i Salesiani ed espressero il desiderio che una colonia di questi andasse a trapiantarsi nelle loro regioni". See MB X 1269, where the account, originally written in the third person, switches from the first to third. *Cronichetta*, 12.05.1875, in ASC A0000101.

¹³⁹ MB XVII 7.

the general theme (call to the missions, extending the Valdocco experience), or the single details (the land, the target, the method of evangelization)? If the nature of the dream is “revelatory”, why would the land be hinted but not clearly revealed? The problems are endless and Don Bosco himself had to contend with them, even with regard to his dreams about China¹⁴⁰.

If the revelatory content of the dream, and other dreams, remains elusive and difficult to pinpoint and to evaluate, there are aspects of the dream and contents of the narrative that are reliable, solid and useful: the dreams narrated to the young, for instance, have undisputed pedagogical and pastoral value¹⁴¹; those regarding the future and the mission of the Congregation, as is the case here, have an equally undoubted spiritual value, which may truly be considered the central theme of Don Bosco’s dreams¹⁴². In other words, this and other dreams could be above all spiritual messages rather than prophecies, and as such a confirmation of what Don Bosco taught in his writings, talks or spiritual direction. Several authors have taken pains to identify the chief elements of this spiritual content, which may be summarized as follows:

- “1. Salvation of souls as priority and goal of mission, integral human development as means to achieve this (souls, education as a catalyst of social change, the politics of the ‘Our Father’);
2. The preferential option of the Salesians for the young in need and the method of evangelizing through the young;
3. The characteristics of a Salesian missionary spirituality: work, temperance, kindness, chastity, etc.”.

These may well be the timeless riches contained in Don Bosco’s dreams, and his five missionary dreams in particular: true inspirations from God,

¹⁴⁰ Selected bibliography on Don Bosco’s dreams: Pietro STELLA, *Don Bosco’s dreams: a historico-documentary analysis of selected samples*. New Rochelle, Salesiana Publishers 1996 (Italian original 1969); C. ROMERO, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*; E. M. BROWN, *Dreams, visions and prophecies of Don Bosco...*; C. SEMERARO (ed.), *Don Bosco e Brasilia...*, San Juan BOSCO, *Los sueños de Don Bosco*. Estudio introductorio y notas de Fausto JIMENEZ. Madrid 2002³. See also comments in P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. I, pp. 369-372; II pp. 630-635.

¹⁴¹ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. I, p. 371.

¹⁴² “Instead of attributing a miraculous origin to the dreams told by Don Bosco, it is better to see them, as long as they have some moral or spiritual value, as documents of his thought, written surely not without the help of the grace of the Lord. In this way they will not delude us. Let us leave to psychologists and to experts in mystical theology the task of determining the extent of the intervention of God in their unfolding. This undertaking is infinitely delicate and it is understandable that several have made futile attempts in this matter”. F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco and the spiritual life...*, pp. 34-35. More, interesting insights on Don Bosco’s dreams may be found in Francis DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco negli ultimi anni della sua vita (1885-1887)*, in C. SEMERARO (ed.), *Invecchiamento e vita salesiana in Europa*. Torino-Leumann, LDC 1990, pp. 175-195.

fruits not so much of supernatural visions but of a life of faith and dedication in answer to God's call, the real "treasure hidden in the field" (Mt. 13,44)¹⁴³.

3.2. *Concern and dreams about China*

In the five "missionary dreams" scholars have seen reflected Don Bosco's hopes and prospects for the development of the Salesian Society especially in the "period of consolidation" of his enterprise, comprising mainly the 1870's and early 80's, the most active years in his life. The outlook and dimension of these dreams are worldwide, often represented by fantastic travels to far flung and unknown lands. The dreams portray an idealized vision of the Salesian work in the world. Logically, they are in continuity with the class of dreams known as "vocation dreams". Seen as such, they are indicative of Don Bosco and the Salesian Society's vocation and apostolate. Don Bosco, consistently prudent in his assessment of his earlier dreams, assigned great importance especially to the latter ones. He narrated them with absolute seriousness even to the General Chapter and sometimes spent considerable effort in editing or having them edited: he was convinced that through them the Lord was calling him and the Salesian Society to fulfil a special mission. Therein we see reflected the anxieties, the convictions and hopes of Don Bosco. Dreams of this type appeared in the 1850's (dream of the wheel), grew in the 1870's, when the Congregation was expanding, and peaked in the 1880's, when distance from the actual mission field and physical decline combined to intensify the phenomenon. These later dreams, together with Don Bosco's frequent reminders expressing his vision of the present and future expansion of the Salesian Society, are accompanied by fears, fruit of spiritual and moral concerns, not just about the effectiveness of the Society's apostolate, but about its very survival, which explains the "strongly cautionary prophetic words" in which his expectations are couched¹⁴⁴.

There is a definite link between the dreams and the challenges Don Bosco set to himself, the difficulties he faced, the anxieties, the circumstances he was going through, his forward-looking plans, his declining health, his approaching end, or even certain immediate events. Nobody has better captured the psychology and mind-set of Don Bosco in his last years (1886-1888), unable to be physically present and in command in the mission field, than P.

¹⁴³ See A. LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, 126-130; P. BRAIDO, *Il progetto operativo...*, pp. 7-12, 18-28; Jesús BORREGO, *Recuerdos de San Juan Bosco a los primeros misioneros*. Roma, LAS 1984, pp. 16-40; DESRAMAUT, *Il pensiero missionario di Don Bosco...*, pp. 49-61.

¹⁴⁴ A. LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, p. 92. MB XVII 30-31.

Braido, who is of the opinion that it makes more sense to try to know Don Bosco better in order to better understand his dreams, rather than the other way around. On this, which could be regarded as another useful key to understanding Don Bosco's dreams in this period, and the missionary dreams in particular, Braido wrote:

“Meno presente fisicamente nel campo del lavoro effettivo, don Bosco lo era con i messaggi a voce o per iscritto e, idealmente, con l'immagine che i suoi figli portavano nel pensiero, nel cuore, nel loro stile di azione. Ma c'era di più. I vincoli dell'attività ridotta e dei disagi di salute anziché bloccare sembravano mettere le ali ai disegni diurni e ai sogni notturni, questi specchio o prolungamento di quelli. È un fenomeno, del resto, che sembra aver preso particolare sviluppo proprio a partire dagli anni del declino fisico. In prevalenza, i sogni riguardano due aspetti fondamentali, in qualche modo esaltanti per il presente e preoccupanti per il futuro: la diffusione delle opere salesiane nel mondo e la fedeltà dei salesiani alle ispirazioni originarie. [...] Egli ne parla volentieri ai vicini, i membri dei Capitoli, superiore e generale, a don Lemoyne, poi nell'ultimo scorcio di vita a don Viglietti, che registra, affascinato, raccogliendo anche incubi e allucinazioni”¹⁴⁵.

In the 1871-72 dream “about Patagonia” one finds no reference to China, even though for a while Don Bosco thought it might refer to the vicinity of Hong Kong. The first such reference is found in *the 1876 dream “of the raging bull”*, which he narrated at the end of the summer retreat at Lanzo, when, having sent his first missionaries to America, he was contemplating an almost simultaneous expansion in Asia. In the dream, invited to stand on a huge bolder in the middle of a boundless field, he was shown “the harvest awaiting the Salesians”. Asked to face the four points of the compass, among other things he saw in the east were “women whose feet were so tiny they could barely stand or walk”. It was an obvious reference to China¹⁴⁶. Don Bosco's interest in Asia and China in this first, programmatic stage had waned by May 1877, since by then he had come to accept that his planned establishment of a mission in America, and Patagonia in particular, was far more demanding than he had anticipated in terms of timing, financial and human resources. His concern towards Asia is discernible again as from mid 1883, when he was finally able to secure the planting of his own mission ter-

¹⁴⁵ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. II, pp. 630-631.

¹⁴⁶ MB XII 466. Mr. Lo Pa-hong, the benefactor who invited the Salesians to go to Shanghai, quoted this particular – “we are the people with little feet seen by Don Bosco” – in a letter drafted by Fr. Luigi Versiglia in August 1920 in order to convince the then reluctant Superior Chapter to send Salesians to open their first house there. Lo to Rinaldi 30.08.1920 in ASC F726.

ritories in Argentina. This second stage, less programmatic and more visionary, would extend into the remaining years of his life.

In *the dream of 29-30 August 1883* Don Bosco travels across the entire Latin American Continent, in what gradually became the dream about Latin America par excellence¹⁴⁷. China is mentioned in passing, early on, in a passage added to the manuscript by Don Bosco in his own handwriting. The dream had been first written by Lemoyne, but underwent extensive and multiple re-elaborations, with the result that the final draft is five times longer and contains significant new elements unmentioned in the first, shorter draft. Don Bosco attached great importance to it: he had just reached or was about to reach the end of a lengthy struggle to have his own independent mission territory, the Vicariate Apostolic of Patagonia, where the Salesians could carry out their work autonomously with Cagliero at its head. He submitted a formal application to the Holy See on July 29, 1883. That same July the Salesian Society set foot in Niteroi, Brazil. News of Rome's approval of the Vicariate was communicated to the Salesian procurator in Rome on August 27. We do not know when the news reached Don Bosco. He had the dream on the night of August 30, vigil of St. Rose of Lima, either while awaiting Rome's response or when he had just been informed of the felicitous results. Four days later Don Bosco narrated it to the members of the 3rd General Chapter and Don Lemoyne produced the first, shorter draft. The extensive re-writing (the text was sent to the missions in America for checking, and possibly for integrations), the elaborate dialogues and the articulate considerations are indicators that Don Bosco wished to use it for instructive purposes. Don Lemoyne produced the final draft and packaged the story much like a three act drama, the literary form that was his forte. It was used by Salesian provincials in America to justify policies and by civil governments to push for development plans, notably the foundation of Brazil's capital, Brasilia¹⁴⁸.

In it China features in passing, in what is actually a personal consideration of Don Bosco that aptly summarizes some of his key ideas on missions. In his dream he finds several people gathered in what looked like a recreation hall discussing a variety of topics. The crisis of Catholic missions is brought up:

“A lengthy conversation centered on the hordes of savages in Australia, the Indies, China, Africa, and more especially America, who in countless numbers are presently entombed in the darkness of death.

«Europe», said one of the speakers with much conviction, «Christian Europe, the great mistress of civilization and Catholicism, seems to have lost all in-

¹⁴⁷ A. DA SILVA FERREIRA, *Due sogni sulle missioni della Patagonia...*, p. 103.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 120; C. SEMERARO (ed.), *Don Bosco e Brasilia...*

terest in the foreign missions. Few are those who have enough enthusiasm to brave long journeys and unknown lands to save the souls of millions of people redeemed by the Son of God, Jesus Christ». Another said, «How many idolaters in America alone live miserably outside the Church, far from the knowledge of the Gospel [...]»¹⁴⁹.

We have here Don Bosco's theology of the kingdom of God, his understanding of the Church's nature and role, his anxiety for souls, his conviction – typical of 19th Century European Catholicism – that there could be no true civilization without Christianity, and finally the regret that Europe no longer seemed interested in fulfilling its evangelizing and civilizing role¹⁵⁰. In this view, peoples not yet evangelized are lumped together with the “savages”, or “idolaters”: the two do not differ much. It would be interesting to know precisely what had given Don Bosco the impression that Europe was no longer the fervent evangelizer and civilizer he had praised in his *Storia Ecclesiastica* decades earlier, and how he consequently was suggesting that the Salesian Society had a role to play in reversing this trend. Earlier that year he had been through a triumphant fundraising trip in France. He had been in Paris, the “intellectual metropolis of Europe”; in Lyon he had had to press vigorously merely to get the attention of – leave alone subsidies from – the gentlemen of the Association for the Propagation of Faith. Of course, since 1879 France had become “Republican France”: secularized, anti-clerical, and at risk of relinquishing her leadership in missionary endeavour¹⁵¹.

China features prominently in *the fourth missionary dream*, which occurred in Mathi, where Don Bosco was resting, the date unknown. He narrated it to the members of the Superior Chapter the evening of 2 July 1885. Things were finally looking up in the missions: the Vicariate Apostolic of Patagonia had received papal approval and Giuseppe Fagnano's men were beginning to settle in the newly erected Prefecture Apostolic of Southern Patagonia and of Tierra del Fuego in spite of serious difficulties. Don Bosco had appointed Cagliero, now a bishop, his vicar for all the houses in America. Requests were pouring in from many places for new foundations. Don Bosco needed no convincing that Salesian work was destined to spread worldwide and so his eyes started turning to other Continents.

¹⁴⁹ MB XVI 385; BM XVI 304. Critical text in C. ROMERO, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, pp. 81-93; A. DA SILVA FERREIRA, *Due sogni sulle missioni della Patagonia...*, 117-139. Additions to the text were appended as late as 1922 at the insistence of missionaries from S. America. *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

¹⁵⁰ F. DESRAMAUT, *Il pensiero missionario di Don Bosco...*, pp. 54-61; A. LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, pp. 126-130.

¹⁵¹ MB XVI 68, 258; P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. II, pp. 508, 517-518; F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps...*, pp. 1172-1176.

Also this text is a composite one, redacted by Lemoyne in different stages and preserved in at least two versions and one French translation, which had been commissioned by Don Bosco for count Louis A. Colle of Toulon, a great admirer and benefactor. In the dream Don Bosco assists in three scenes presided over by Angels, each representing one of the continents of Asia, Africa and Oceania. The one that struck him most was the “Angel of Arphaxad” – representing China, he would later conclude – standing on a high mountain. At the foot of the mountains were peoples speaking the most diverse and unknown languages. Among the many places he was shown were Hong Kong, Macao “at the mouth of the infinitely vast sea and facing a gigantic mountain from which one could see China”, and the Chinese empire. The Angel was sounding the missionary call, inviting the Salesians to “fight the battles of the Lord and gather all the peoples in his granaries”¹⁵².

Don Bosco was intrigued by this mysterious Arphaxad, whose name, he claimed, he had never heard, a particular that induced him to believe the dream to be a genuine revelation: how could he have made up such an exotic name all by himself! He commissioned cleric Angelo Festa to undertake research in bible, history, geography books and journals, to try to shed light on what people or peoples on earth Arphaxad was connected with. “At last, he believed he had found the key to the mystery in the first volume of Rohrbacher, who states that the Chinese are descendants of Arphaxad”. Don Bosco believed – or found it convenient to believe – that he had seen China: he looked no further. On 10 August 1885 he wrote in French to count Colle: “Our friend Louis – the deceased son of the count, his guide in the dream – has taken me for a stroll to the centre of Africa, the land of Cam, as he said, and to the land of Arphaxad, or China”. The Salesian Central Archives still keep a document entitled *I Cinesi discendenti di Arphaxad*, the results of Festa's research, which may have been “serious” in the good cleric's intention but is actually amateurish. On the left column there is a French translation. Don Bosco corrected it marginally and it was integrally included in the Biographical Memoirs sourcebook, the *Documenti per scrivere la storia di Don Giovanni Bosco*. Don Ceria eventually chose to publish only edited extracts in the Biographical Memoirs, and added his own comments or considerations¹⁵³.

Arphaxad, it turned out, was a son of Sem and hence a nephew of Noah. After the flood, according to the “Table of Nations” (1 Ch, 1,4-24) the three

¹⁵² MB XVII 643-647; BM XVII 594-598.

¹⁵³ The Festa document is in ASC A0170604.

sons of Noah – Sem, Cam and Japheth – and their descendants were thought to have spread to neighbouring lands to repopulate the earth. Being accompanied by the Angel of Cam, clearly meant that Don Bosco was being shown an African landscape. But Arphaxad? Young cleric Festa mainly checked Rene Francois Rohrbacher's at times uncritical *Storia Ecclesiastica*¹⁵⁴, dutifully quoting the authors credited in the footnotes, thus giving the research a semblance, at least, of a scholarly job. He "thought" he had found the key to the mystery in Vol. 1 Book IV. Actually Rohrbacher nowhere says that "the Chinese are descendants of Arphaxad": he states that Arphaxad is the father of the Hebrews. Other contemporary authors, in fact, were of the opinion that he had settled in Mesopotamia, making him an ancestor of Abraham. The research did not produce clear and reliable results: how Don Bosco, or his aides, were able to conclude that Arphaxad was the Angel of China is puzzling. It took all the good will of Don Ceria, the author of volume XVII of the *Memorie Biografiche*, to solve the riddle: since Genesis 10, 22 mentions Arphaxad immediately after two other sons of Sem who were (supposedly) connected with the peoples living further East, "it would not be improbable to see that the Angel of Arphaxad stands for the Angel of China"¹⁵⁵.

Of course there was still Don Bosco's conviction that the name Arphaxad had been previously unknown to him: or so he thought. Ethnologists were then postulating theories about the transmigration of peoples from Asia to North America via the Sea of Bering, or from Africa to Brazil via the Capo Verde Isles. Don Bosco – reports Barberis in his *Cronichetta* – became interested in these topics in mid 1875, precisely when he was preparing to send his first group of Salesians to Argentina and, at the same time thinking about his next move to Asia. He read about new expeditions of German and Italian explorers, about sea travel and recent discoveries. On May 12, as he was chatting with some of the Confreres under the portico in Valdocco, he spoke among other things about the first inhabitants of America, affirming how it was "highly probable that the sons of Arphaxad (I think) could have transmigrated to North America from Asia across the Strait of Bering"¹⁵⁶. Don Bosco knew of Arphaxad, and knew that scholars then made a link between him and the peoples of Asia. Missionaries in China were keen to match these theories with biblical data and Chinese chronology, and more than one of them postulated the possibility that Noah and China's mythical first em-

¹⁵⁴ Rene Francois ROHRBACHER, *Storia Ecclesiastica dal principio del mondo sino ai di nostri*. Torino 1864. The original French was published at Nancy 1842-1849.

¹⁵⁵ BM XVII 597-598. E. CERIA, *Annali* I 555.

¹⁵⁶ *Cronichetta* I, p. 17 in ASC A0000101.

peror Fu-hsi might be one and the same person¹⁵⁷. Leaving aside these biblical-ethnological assumptions, which today we regard as untenable, his biographer concludes – the origin of this information being unknown – that from that time on

“Don Bosco fixed his attention on China, and said he believed it would not be long before the Salesians would be summoned there. In fact, once he added, «If I had twenty missionaries to send to China, I am sure that they would be given a triumphant welcome, despite the persecutions». So from that time on, he always took a keen interest in all that concerned the Celestial Empire”¹⁵⁸.

A minor, but enlightening detail regarding this dream is Lemoyne's statement that Don Bosco could not correctly remember all the names of the numerous places he had had a glimpse of: “Macao, for example, was called «Meaco» in his narration”. While Lemoyne was intent at collecting materials and publishing the first eight volumes of the Biographical Memoirs, the first expedition of Salesians had already set foot in Macao, hence the observation. It was Monsignor Vincenzo Cimatti (1879-1965), who led the first Salesian expedition to Japan in 1926, who in 1940 pointed out that “Meaco” or more properly “Miyako”, was the old name of Japan's imperial city, i.e. Kyoto. But since the dream's description did not fit this city, one could conclude it was Tokyo that Don Bosco saw, which is dominated by Mt. Fuji, from where one could see China if not with physical eyes at least with prophetic eyes. Mental gymnastics, really: Miyako always referred to Kyoto, the old capital, and never to Edo, the new capital, today's Tokyo¹⁵⁹. It must be said that 18th century maps and atlases of East Asia prominently featured the name Meaco: Don Bosco could not have missed it. Images, data and names that surfaced in his dreams were those he keenly explored in the books he consulted. One

¹⁵⁷ *Annali della Propagazione della Fede*, Vol. VIII, Lione 1841, pp. 229-230. Fu-hsi, 2953BC, is the first of the five emperors of the legendary period. The teachings attributed to him were hunting, fishing, the keeping of flocks and herds, cooking of food, the making of musical instruments, etc. Samuel COULING, *The Encyclopaedia Sinica*. Shanghai 1917, pp. 185, 198.

¹⁵⁸ BM XVII, p. 598. Persecutions stirred by antiforeign feelings are recorded for the years 1885-86 in Kiangsi Province. Fortunato MARGIOTTI, *La Cina cattolica al traguardo della maturità*, in Joseph METZLER, *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Rerum Memoria 1622-1972*, Vol. III/1 1815-1972. Roma, Herder 1975, p. 528.

¹⁵⁹ A. LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, p. 114; E. CERIA, *Annali* I 554f. On Miyako see two classics: Engelbert KAEMPFER, *History of Japan*. London 1727, which was published in several languages (Kaempfer also produced a map known as: *The land route from Osaka to Miyako and from there to Yokkaichi*) and Michael COOPER SJ (tr. & ed.), *This Island of Japon: João Rodrigues' account of 16th-century Japan*. Tokyo, Kodansha International 1973, an edited translation of *João Rodrigues SJ, Historia da Igreja do Japão*, composed between 1620 and 1633.

thing is certain, and this is that Don Bosco positively knew of Meaco: many of the martyrs of Nagasaki were from Meaco and the name is mentioned several times in the *Storia Ecclesiastica*¹⁶⁰. Chances are that Don Bosco had barely heard of or paid attention to Macao, and perhaps that even Shanghai, which had been opened to foreign trade in 1843 and which by the late 1920's would become a major centre of Salesian expansion towards China's heartland, had not captured his attention to the extent that Hong Kong had, chiefly because of the 1873-1874 negotiations with Raimondi¹⁶¹. The Portuguese enclave of Macao had by then considerably lost importance, a tendency made worse by the rise of Hong Kong, even in the ecclesiastical sphere. Peking was, of course, the capital of the Celestial Empire and had featured prominently in the Italian press, and in missionary magazines, particularly on the occasion of its invasion by the Anglo-French army in 1860. For sometime the Sardinian government had considered sending a battle ship to China and join the Western powers in prying open the Far East, notably China, Japan and Vietnam, in the belief that this would produce political and economic dividends¹⁶². If Don Bosco saw all the centres where the Salesians would be working in the future, it would not seem gratuitous to conclude that the cities he specifically mentioned to Lemoyne were precisely the ones he was familiar with.

Less problematic, from a textual point of view, is *the dream of Barcelona-Sarriá*, which Don Bosco had during the night between 9 and 10 April 1886 in the wake of the favourable developments obtained in South America. From the top of a hill near Becchi Don Bosco saw a string of future Salesian works in a line linking Valparaiso, through Central Africa, to Peking. When he narrated it to several Salesians the following morning, he became emotional, a fact recorded by Carlo Viglietti, author of the "Barcelona Diary",

¹⁶⁰ G. BOSCO, *Storia Ecclesiastica (1871)*..., pp. 358-360, OE XXIV, pp. [358-360]. The original document containing the names of the Japanese Martyrs is in Don Giovanni Bonetti's handwriting, with personal corrections by Don Bosco. ASC A2350610. *Giovanni Bonetti (1838-1891)*, one of the founding members of the Salesian Society. Writer, first director of the Salesian Bulletin, helped Don Bosco write some of his books. In 1886 he was elected Spiritual Director of the Society. E. VALENTINI - A. RODINÒ (edd.), *Dizionario biografico...*, p. 46.

¹⁶¹ Macao, "city situated on China's border", is referred to in passing in BOSCO, *Storia Ecclesiastica (1871)*, p. 353, OE XXIV, p. [353]. The BM do not mention any "prophecy" of Don Bosco regarding Shanghai. However, Don Versiglia, while announcing to Don Albera that the Salesians had been called to take over the direction of an orphanage in that city while they had their hands full with Shiuchow, as a form of encouragement referred to a particular saying of Don Bosco, which he reported between quotation marks: "e Shanghai diverrà un centro di personale". The quotation is unique and unconfirmed. Versiglia to Albera 28.02.1920, ASC A3510522.

¹⁶² "Museo" 42 (16 ottobre 1859) 671.

who immediately put it into writing. It was reproduced, marginally edited by Lemoyne, in the Biographical Memoirs. It was received at home and abroad in a climate of excitement and prophetic anticipation: it was “but the outline of a grand and very lengthy vision, the story of the splendid future that God is preparing for the Salesians”, as Viglietti put it¹⁶³. Don Bosco first heard and then saw a huge crowd of youngsters appear from nowhere, who gathered around him saying: “We have waited for you quite a while, but here you are finally among us, and we will not let you go!”. He was dumbfounded by the scene, when he saw a shepherdess leading a flock of lambs, who reminded him of his first dream, when he was nine. She proceeded together with the youngsters to show him a landscape that extended as far as the eye could see, with Valparaiso and Santiago at one end and Peking at the other: the field where his sons would work, the centres where they would be formed, including Hong Kong and many others, where “houses, studentates and noviciates” would be erected. The challenges were not simple: here were man-eating “savages”, there were heretics and persecutors. The shepherdess made two recommendations: that the Salesians keep constantly “the virtue of Mary”, and that they be careful not to replace heavenly science with earthly sciences.

Don Lemoyne, who later discussed the dream with Don Bosco, could not resist inserting one addition regarding Peking which is not found in Viglietti's manuscript: “Then Don Bosco saw a large city. It was traversed by a wide river spanned by large bridges”, which is quite surprising, because Peking is perhaps the only metropolis in China not built on a river's banks. Another perplexing particular came via the same Don Lemoyne:

“Don Bosco speaking of this dream with D. Lemoyne, when he had returned to Turin, exclaimed in a calm and penetrating tone: “When the Salesians will be in China and will happen to be on the two banks of the river that flows near Peking... some will walk up to the left bank of the river from the side of the great Empire, while others will make their way down the right bank from the side of Tartary. Oh, what a glory that will be for our Congregation when they will meet there and shake hands! Time, however, is in the hands of God!”¹⁶⁴.

With rivers in Northern China flowing eastward, Tartary is actually on the left and the Empire on the right bank's side. Lemoyne sent copy of the

¹⁶³ Viglietti to Lemoyne, 12.04.1886 in ASC A0100205, quoted in A. LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, p. 117 and MB XVIII 72.

¹⁶⁴ *Documenti* XXXI 215; MB XVIII 74. “Near Peking”: originally “nelle vicinanze di Pechino”, is translated as “through the Peking region” in BM XVIII 52.

text to Monsignor Cagliero, volunteering a personal interpretation of some details: the presence of Don Michele Rua meant “the spiritual side” of the Congregation and that of Brother Giuseppe Rossi represented “the material side”; both persons appeared worried in the dream but would be reassured by the future developments announced. Not only did the biographer not consider the interpretation far-fetched, but added that that is precisely what occurred.¹⁶⁵ The Biographical Memoirs go on to quote letters from missionaries in Santiago and Valparaiso received the following year 1887, describing episodes of young children welcoming the missionaries which echoed the joyous greeting of the children in the dream, which is really not surprising, considering that Cagliero made copies of the text for all the houses in America, as he had been instructed to by Lemoyne. Regarding future developments in Peking the biographer had nothing to offer, except some words of regret and hope from Don Bosco: “I myself will not witness it. But my sons will see what the Blessed Virgin has in store for us in China!”, words recorded by Don Viglietti in his diary on 3rd July 1886. The echo of the last two dreams, in fact, was discernible at Valdocco long thereafter. China was on Don Bosco’s mind all the time, and Viglietti wrote of a coincidence he felt was remarkable:

“Maria Ausiliatrice prepara ai salesiani le strade che essi debbono battere. Da qualche mese D. Bosco non fa che parlare della Cina. Festa fu da lui incaricato di serii studii su quei luoghi... ed oggi arriva inaspettatamente una lettera dalla China (Shanghai). Racconta che fu eretto un gran Santuario nelle vicinanze di Shanghai dedicato a Maria Ausiliatrice, che la accorrono in pellegrinaggio i Chinesi... fanno la via crucis e pratiche di pietà e ottengono grazie straordinarie... D. Bosco commosso alle lagrime dice che egli non più, ma i suoi figli vedranno ciò che Maria ha loro preparato nella China”¹⁶⁶.

In this fifth missionary dream, the last of his important dreams, Don Bosco revisits Becchi and the first dream about his vocation. It is as if he were trying to link the grand project of a worldwide apostolate he conceived in old age to the humble apostolic aspirations of his childhood. Indeed, having set the American enterprise on secure bases, the last years of Don Bosco’s life, marked by evident physical decline but enlightened by mystic and visionary inspiration, were but an uninterrupted projection of his hopes

¹⁶⁵ MB XVIII 74.

¹⁶⁶ Original text in ASC A0090301, which differs from the copy in ASC A0100108. Don Bosco published news of the devotion to Mary Help of Christians at the Sheshan (Zo-sé) shrine in his *Nove giorni consacrati all’augusta Madre del Salvatore sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice* already in 1870.

for the future of Salesian work. This dream, so to speak, caps his visionary project¹⁶⁷.

3.3. *China in Don Bosco's writings and conversations*

As mentioned, what Don Bosco saw at night in these dreams was linked to events he lived by day, or phases he was going through, of which they were projections and elaborations. They further fuelled his imagination: for months on end – as people around him noticed in 1886 – he kept talking endlessly about China. It was part of his temperament: when planning the Patagonian mission he exhibited a similar behaviour¹⁶⁸. Likewise, certain familiar expressions found on his lips, which could easily be taken as “prophecies” about development in a particular region, be they about China or other mission lands, when compared they appear for what they are, i.e. verbalizations of his vision or conviction regarding the future of the Congregation: “What a wonderful day that will be – he was heard saying – when Salesian Missionaries, moving up the Congo River, from one mission post to another, will meet their confreres coming up the Nile and join hands, praising God!” or, “What a wonderful day that will be – Fr. Francesco Damazzo testified to having heard him say several times – when our missionaries will go to evangelize the various regions of America, Australia, India, Egypt, and many other lands! I see them already penetrating Africa and Asia and entering China: we shall have a house right in Peking!”, words which in Dalmazzo’s recollection bore witness to Don Bosco’s faith, not his gift of prophecy¹⁶⁹.

Of the same nature are other episodes that occurred towards the end of his life. In October 1886, following the Barcelona dream, while in S. Benigno Don Bosco engaged in conversation with cleric Arturo Conelli and started talking about the China missions and the Yellow River, on whose banks Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would work one day. Conelli felt it was no casual conversation:

“[Don Bosco] aveva lo sguardo fisso in alto e il volto ispirato. Don Conelli sentiva di essere vicino al soprannaturale. Il Santo parlò a lungo in tono vibrato, ansioso, e quando tacque, parve tornare in sé da una mistica contemplazione. Dopo un istante di pausa domandò: – Che cosa ho detto? – Don Conelli glielo riassunse. Ed egli: – Oh, non badare, Don Bosco fabbrica

¹⁶⁷ A. LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, p. 116.

¹⁶⁸ Viglietti in ASC A009.0301 and Barberis in MB XII 279.

¹⁶⁹ BM XI 384. Testifying in the process of canonization, Dalmazzo used these words to give credit to Don Bosco’s *faith*. ASC A2680701.

sempre al suo solito castelli in aria... Del resto, anche quando voleva andare in Patagonia, i Cardinali dicevano che Don Bosco era pazzo. Invece si è visto. Ma in Cina, quanto maggior bene faranno i Salesiani!”¹⁷⁰.

The episode is not reported in the Biographical Memoirs, but is narrated in Ceria's *Annals*, probably because Ceria played a small part in it. The scene is set again on a river bank, here for the first time identified as the Yellow River, perhaps a logical conclusion of Ceria's rather than Don Bosco's identification: viewed on a map, the Yellow River flows “near Peking”! Don Bosco appears to have been fascinated by rivers, perhaps because they are easily recognizable features on maps and atlases, which he was seen studying, intensely absorbed¹⁷¹. But he never identified any Chinese river. Conelli disclosed the contents of the conversation to the clerics, who enthusiastically gave their names to a list of volunteers which Don Barberis drew up and presented to Don Bosco. Among them was Ceria's name. Top of the list was Conelli. Don Bosco showed complacency but did not express any opinion. The episode, however, was taken to mean that Conelli would head the first missionary expedition to China perhaps by linking this fact with what had happened to Don Bodrato, who first heard from Don Bosco the dream on Patagonia and months later was chosen to head the second expedition to South America. Don Barberis, the likely source of the link, spread rumours that also cleric Festa, to whom Don Bosco had entrusted some research on China, was destined for the China missions¹⁷²! None of those who were on the list, however, went to China. Years later Ceria was to admit that Don Bosco was probably “joking”. Not Conelli, though: he firmly believed it was a prophetic word and, back in Foglizzo, he asked Don Bosco for instructions on how the Society should proceed in organizing the future China expedition¹⁷³.

That Don Bosco in his last years envisioned Salesian expansion in Asia, and China in particular, is confirmed by yet another episode not found in the Biographical Memoirs but narrated by Card. Cagliero first to Don Versiglia in late June 1916, and two years later to the first batch of missionaries departing for the Shiuchow mission. Cagliero, then Vicar Apostolic in Patagonia, had returned in late 1887 to see Don Bosco for the last time. Only a few days earlier, on January 8, Don Bosco had received the Duke of Norfolk at his bed-

¹⁷⁰ E. CERIA, *Annali* III 596-597.

¹⁷¹ MB XI 409.

¹⁷² *Cronichetta* (copy) in ASC A0100108, p. 243.

¹⁷³ Carlo SOCOL, *The first twenty years of the Orfanato of Macao between ideal and reality (1906-1926)*, in Francesco MOTTO (ed.), *Insedimenti e iniziative salesiane dopo Don Bosco. Saggi di storiografia*. Istituto Storico Salesiano, Studi 9. Roma, LAS 1996, pp. 280-283.

side, and the topic of the China Missions was brought up¹⁷⁴. On Jan 28, 1888, three days before he passed away, Don Bosco called Cagliero near his bed and told him: “Ti raccomando le Missioni... ti raccomando l’Asia!” (I entrust the missions...and Asia to you!). Thinking Don Bosco was confused, he said he worked in the West. To which don Bosco calmly replied: “I entrust Asia to you!”¹⁷⁵ Cagliero saw in these words a return to the old plan that Don Bosco had in mind and that he wanted to entrust to Cagliero in 1876-1877: after taking care of the missions in America he was to go to Asia to help set up a new foundation there.

Don Bosco's clear perception that his mission was destined to reach out to the youth of the whole world, the realization that time was running out for him, and that the mission was now in the hands of the Congregation is nowhere better displayed than in his *Memorie*, the so called *Spiritual Testament*, which contain the famous prediction about China and Peking. To this accounting notebook made up of 140 pages, between 1884 and 1887 Don Bosco entrusted his final recommendations and the fulfilment of his vision, often penned in the shaky handwriting of an old and weary man. It is addressed to his “sons”, to whom he communicates the educative-pastoral criteria, the fundamental principles to which he attained himself as a zealous priest and wise educator, expressing the desire that they keep to the same: the exercise and style of authority, the value he assigned to persons, the idea that professing religious life in the Salesian Congregation basically implied a fundamental choice in favour of poor and abandoned youth, his expectations about fraternal life in Salesian communities, love for poverty, gratitude towards benefactors, care for vocations and trust in the Virgin Mary. From 1885 onward Don Bosco was no longer concerned with the day-to-day administration of the Society, since the Holy See had appointed Don Rua as his vicar and designated successor. As he writes all this at the end of his journey on earth Don Bosco reveals his inner soul, the ascetics of work, the sacrifice and suffering borne with the sole intention to win souls for God, and his constant preoccupation for their eternal salvation¹⁷⁶.

The very last part of the *Testament*, written over more than one occasion towards the end of 1886, hence some time after the Dream of Barcelona, is

¹⁷⁴ MB XVIII 513.

¹⁷⁵ “Bollettino Salesiano”, giugno-luglio 1918, p. 106. Guido BOSIO, *Martiri in Cina*. Torino, LDC 1977, pp. 125-126.

¹⁷⁶ F. MOTTO, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6...*, pp. 73-130. The decree appointing Don Rua as Don Bosco's vicar is dated 27 November 1884. Don Bosco revealed it first to the Chapter, and then to the entire Congregation, the following September 24 and December 8 respectively.

entitled *L'avvenire* (The future) and is particularly touching. He predicts a bright future for the Congregation on condition that “the rules are faithfully observed”: the Congregation will come to an end when “the desire for ease and comfort” sets in. At this point one finds two of Don Bosco’s most deeply felt and constant reminders:

“The world will always welcome us as long as all our concern is for the under-developed peoples [it. *selvaggi*], for poor children, for those members of society most in danger. This is our real wealth which no one will envy and no one will take from us. [...]

When it happens that a Salesian yields his life whilst working for souls, you can say that our Congregation has registered a great triumph and that on it will descend in abundance the blessings of heaven”¹⁷⁷.

This last sentence, rightly famous, sums up the purpose and style of Salesian pastoral and ascetic work. Sandwiched between the two, perhaps to underscore the charismatic quality of the message, is what many consider to be Don Bosco’s “prophecy” about China, here given in the original Italian and an English translation:

“A suo tempo si porteranno le nostre missioni nella Cina e precisamente a Pechino. Ma non si dimentichi che noi andiamo pei fanciulli poveri ed abbandonati. Là fra popoli sconosciuti ed ignoranti del vero Dio si vedranno le meraviglie finora non credute, ma che Iddio potente farà palesi al mondo”¹⁷⁸.

Time will come when our missions will be established in China and precisely in Peking. But let us never forget that we go for poor and abandoned boys. There, among peoples unknown and ignorant of the true God, you will see wonders formerly thought incredible, but which almighty God will make manifest to the world”.

Whether these words are prophecy, future generations will be able to tell. For sure they manifest Don Bosco’s inner conviction that God had entrusted him a worldwide mission in favour of youth and peoples in need, a conviction that grew gradually and matured in old age, nurtured by untiring action and trust in God, refined by intense planning and studying and stimulated by vivid nocturnal dreams in which he saw the maternal care and encouragement of the Virgin Mary. The people, especially the young, who lived in China were still “sconosciuti”, unknown to him. What mattered was that they stood in need of evangelization and of help, and so they found a place in

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127. The English translation is from the *Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales*. Rome 2003, Appendix IV, *From the spiritual testament of St. John Bosco*, pp. 271-272.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

his heart just as the youngsters in Valparaiso or Turin had done. Working among the poor, the forgotten and the abandoned, bringing them God's love and care, was what he had founded the Salesian Society for and for the Salesian Society it was the specific way of contributing to the spreading of the kingdom of God and the promotion of a humane and caring society. His Salesians were already fruitfully carrying out evangelization and human promotion at the other end of the world. He had ardently wished he could do the same in the East, but had come to gradually accept that God had his own timing and that this would not be achieved in his lifetime. The mission was thus entrusted to future generations of Salesians: the day would come, if certain conditions were met.

3.4. Don Bosco 19th century vision of China

By his own admission, Don Bosco knew next to nothing about Patagonia before he set his mind on establishing his missions there, but once he did so he studied the land in all its aspects with his usual, intense determination on books then available, some of which he had requested from Argentina, and with the help of Don Barberis produced a study which he submitted to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in August 1876. The knowledge he acquired afforded him enough confidence to deliver a speech on Patagonia to the *Société de Géographie de Lyon* in 1883, in which he chiefly illustrated the civilizing and evangelizing action of the Salesians among the savage populations and the typically Salesian method used, a speech that included a variety of comments on the region¹⁷⁹. But what did Don Bosco know about China, the other land he was heard speaking about "all the time", especially in his last years? When Don Bosco spoke about China, he did so mostly in general terms: he spoke of souls and of his desire to help them, the future work and expansion of the Congregation and the conditions to achieve that objective. Indeed, the words that came down to us are remarkably devoid of detail about the Country, the culture and the people.

Don Bosco's interest in China considerably predates his interest in Patagonia. In the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith* and, later, in the *Museo delle Missioni Cattoliche*, the two missionary periodicals that he read

¹⁷⁹ G. BOSCO, *La Patagonia e le terre australi...*; *Cronichetta*, ASC A0000107, p. 56. A. DA SILVA FERREIRA, *Due sogni sulle missioni della Patagonia...*, pp. 104-105. F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps...*, p. 1179. Don Bosco was later awarded a silver medal for the civilizing effort of the Salesian missionaries, not for merits towards the *Société de Géographie*, as claimed in MB XVI 69.

at least occasionally, China was – unlike Patagonia – a recurrent topic: from the two periodicals Don Bosco sourced information for some of his publications, namely the 1845 and 1871 editions of his *Storia Ecclesiastica* and the *Nove Giorni* in honour of Mary Help of Christians¹⁸⁰. Very early on he was greatly impressed by the remarkable zeal and endurance of missionaries amidst cruel persecutions there, especially exemplified by Gabriel Perboyre, the young Lazarist missionary martyred in 1840, whose picture he reportedly kept in his study and who featured prominently already in the first edition of the *Storia Ecclesiastica* in 1845¹⁸¹. Indeed, what he wrote in the 1870 edition of the same *Storia* about contemporary missions was exclusively about the vicissitudes of China and Japan¹⁸². From the history of the missions he had learned about the great exploits, and the failure, of 17-18th century Jesuit missionaries in China¹⁸³. Don Bosco knew that the land was inhabited by a huge pagan population of “almost 500 million souls” still awaiting the message of salvation. He knew, probably from hearsay, that women in China bound their feet. From reports published in missionary literature he was also aware that pagans there resorted to the “barbarous” custom of selling or abandoning children and of the efforts of missionaries to save them. Following categories then prevalent in Europe, he would refer to China’s society as “barbarous” and her inhabitants as “savages” not so much because it tolerated customs such as this, or because of the extremely cruel punishment and death inflicted to missionaries caught violating draconian laws forbidding their entry into the country, but because these were expressions of her pagan and idolatrous culture, and this unavoidably placed her and her inhabitants into such category¹⁸⁴. In May 1875, while studying America’s native inhabitants, he got interested in scientific theories and studies about the possibility of the migration of Asiatic tribes towards the American continent via the Strait of Bering, or towards Australia via the various archipelagos of South-East Asia. He had a keen interest in geography, and would often study maps of the vast Country: he knew of a river – whose name probably escaped him – that flowed “near Peking”. This much we gather from information largely already provided. There is more to be said.

¹⁸⁰ Don Bosco relied on the *Annals* for at least one story in the 1845 *Storia Ecclesiastica*, and consulted the “Museo” on China related topics when he re-edited the *Storia* and published the *Nove giorni* in 1870.

¹⁸¹ G. BOSCO, *Storia Ecclesiastica* (1845)..., pp. 381-383, OE I, pp. [539-541].

¹⁸² *Ibid.* (1871), pp. 351-361, OE XXIV, pp. [351-361].

¹⁸³ See MB XII 280; *Documenti* XVII, p. 440, in ASC A066, copied from *Cronichetta*, *ibid.*, A000108.

¹⁸⁴ G. Bosco, *Storia Ecclesiastica* (1871)..., pp. 355-356, OE XXIV, pp. [355-356].

Writing on 19th century missions in his *Storia Ecclesiastica*, Don Bosco dwells at length on the persecution that authorities in China inflicted on the Church, targeting both local Christians and foreign missionaries. Missionaries who ventured into the country especially in the years between 1805, when emperor Chia-ch'ing (1796-1820) promulgated the first of his anti-Christian edicts, and 1844 when emperor Tao-kuang (1821-1850) granted religious tolerance, were aware that if caught martyrdom was a stark possibility and that their evangelization work would consist in little more than trying to save and baptize dying babies with the help of zealous catechists¹⁸⁵. Don Bosco's special attention to the martyrial aspect of mission, as compared to the minimal space dedicated to St. Francis Xavier, does not come as a surprise considering the historical experience he lived through: that of the Church of European Restoration (1815-1830/1848), dressed in martyrial purple, at first intent on restoring co-operation between throne and altar shattered by the French Revolution, then besieged by liberalism, Protestantism and other "forces of evil"; which in turn explains the ecclesiology of a Church built on a rock and against which the doors of hell "would not prevail". Don Bosco shared Pius IX's view that the Church was marked by a fifth characteristic on top of the traditional four: it was and had always been a persecuted Church. Divine providence and justice, however, were at hand to make sure that persecutors did not act beyond the time allotted them and that sooner or later they would meet the punishment they deserved: it was the classical thesis of Lactantius in his *De mortibus persecutorum*¹⁸⁶.

As he wrote about these persecutions, Don Bosco was factually on more solid ground, having read about them in the regular reports carried by missionary magazines, which frequently featured not only the heroic witness of missionaries and believers, but also the diplomatic and military response of European powers, in particular the Second Opium War (1858-1860), which, in European eyes, pitched Western forces against those of a recalcitrant and backward pagan Empire. China's reluctance to abide by treaties, the clash that brewed between a mercantile and militaristic Europe and a China wary of opening its frontiers to a culture it despised and feared, the inconclusive negotiations, the shows of force of the British and French navies and their even-

¹⁸⁵ The 1848 volume of the *Annals* quotes the following statistic: 243,696 baptisms administered in the last four years (1836-1839), of which 186,000 were baptisms of children or babies. *Annali della Propagazione della Fede*, 20 (1848) 370-371. A summary of the situation of the Church in China during this period in F. MARGIOTTI, *La Cina cattolica al traguardo della maturità...*, pp. 510-517.

¹⁸⁶ Franco MOLINARI, *La "Storia Ecclesiastica" di Don Bosco*, in P. BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco nella Chiesa...*, pp. 203-237.

tual attack brought directly against the capital city, all these were chronicled on a weekly basis in the *Museo* during the years 1858-1860. Had Don Bosco merely leafed through this and other similar periodicals he could not have missed the drama unfolding in the East. The opening up of China and Japan had attracted the attention of the European press and opinion. Even tiny Piedmont, by any account a marginal country in the political landscape of Europe, did not want to be left out and decided to open a Consulate in Hong Kong in 1858. The royal decree, dated 8 August 1858, found a place also in the *Museo delle Missioni Cattoliche*¹⁸⁷.

These events, the only ones he did not write based on ‘dream’ or hearsay, but on reality seen – naturally – through European eyes, eventually found their way into the *Storia Ecclesiastica*. The eyes of the author were, of course, those of a 19th century priest, hence the theological and heavily providentialistic reading he offered. Having described in some detail the harrowing experience which martyrs Giovanni da Triora¹⁸⁸, Charles Corney and Gabriel Perboyre had gone through and their heroic steadfastness, he chronicled the liberation of the Church in China in the following terms:

“Libertà cristiana nella China. – I cristiani nella China continuarono ancora ad essere perseguitati per vari anni: ma la persecuzione non rattiepidiva per nulla lo zelo dei missionarii, benché il recarsi colà a predicare il vangelo fosse un esporsi al martirio. Finalmente Iddio ebbe pietà di quella misera nazione, e dispose che la colta Europa andasse a mettere freno a tanta barbarie. L’anno 1858, dopo molte fatiche, spese e combattimenti, la Francia e l’Inghilterra riuscirono a passare i confini del Celeste Impero, che è il nome dato all’impero cinese. Questo fatto dimostra ad evidenza quanto la civiltà europea, che è frutto del cristianesimo, sovrasti alla civiltà cinese prodotta dal gentilesimo, mentre poche migliaia di Francesi ed Inglesi poterono riportare vittoria sopra un impero di 400 milioni d’abitanti e dettar loro la legge. La Francia adunque e l’Inghilterra vittoriose sulla Cina conchiusero un trattato [...]”

At this point the *Storia* goes on to list the main clauses of the treaty of Tientsin (26 June 1858), one of more than 120 treaties signed by China in those years and by her dubbed “unequal”, because forced at gunpoint: the opening of treaty ports, the exchange of ambassadors, the protection of the law granted to foreigners and the freedom for the “Catholic Religion” to be

¹⁸⁷ “Museo” 35 (1858) 547.

¹⁸⁸ *Giovanni da Triora OFM* (1760-1816) was ordained a priest at 24 and in 1799, while the French Revolution was raging and the China missions were depleted of workers, he left for Hunan, dedicating himself to Christian renewal among Catholics. In 1815 his activity was declared subversive and he was imprisoned with a group of his faithful. He was judicially convicted of illegal entry and strangled on a cross. He was canonized in 2000.

practiced all over the Country¹⁸⁹. Religious benefits resulted, and on these the readers' attention is drawn in the concluding paragraph:

“Così dopo trecento anni di persecuzione il sangue dei martiri generando novelli cristiani mise termine anche in quell'immenso impero alla persecuzione legale della Chiesa cristiana. I missionari poterono quindi uscire dai loro nascondigli, mostrarsi pubblicamente, raccogliere i cristiani qua e là dispersi, innalzare chiese, aprire scuole, orfanotrofi ed ospedali. In loro aiuto corsero già e vanno correndo ogni dì altri nuovi missionari: molti vescovadi vi furono già stabiliti, e nella stessa Pechino, capitale dell' impero, risiede un vescovo cattolico, il quale vi compie solennemente e pubblicamente e talora con intervento delle autorità civili, le auguste cerimonie della nostra s. Religione”¹⁹⁰.

The ideas and sentiments expressed in these two paragraphs will undoubtedly surprise us today, but certainly not Don Bosco's contemporaries. They are not peculiar to him, but rather represent what mid-nineteenth century people in Europe actually thought.

1. *God's providential hand.* “God finally took pity on this miserable nation...” and made use of the intervention by the Anglo-French armies to put an end to the “barbarous killing” of peaceful missionaries. God always looks upon his Church, especially when she is persecuted, and comes as helper of believers and punisher of wrongdoers: it is a leitmotif of the *Storia Ecclesiastica*. God's justice will not allow certain situations to persist for too long and so He intervenes in the persecutions of the early Church, the 17th century Japanese persecution, the fall of Napoleon, the liberation of Rome and now in China through the valiant role of France, here seen as God's instrument. France's role in the liberation of Christians in China is subtly underscored also by Don Bosco, who lists this country's war effort first, as behoves the leading Catholic power of the time, even though the number of soldiers and vessels it committed to the expedition was substantially inferior compared to Great Britain's. Some writers – no doubt French – went on to glorify the role of France as a catalyst of religious peace, being the nation that had most generously contributed missionaries and paid the heaviest debt in martyrs' blood, a merit that Don Bosco recognized¹⁹¹. In the hope of seeing an end to perse-

¹⁸⁹ G. BOSCO, *Storia Ecclesiastica (1871)*..., p. 356, OE XXV, p. [356]. The essence of these clauses was published also in “Museo” 34 (1858) 570. See also *Treaties*, in S. COULING, *The Encyclopaedia Sinica*..., pp. 569-571.

¹⁹⁰ G. BOSCO, *Storia Ecclesiastica (1871)*..., p. 356. The persecution did not last 300 years, but 120 years, from Emperor Yong-cheng proscription of Christianity in 1724 to Emperor Tao-kuang concession of toleration in 1844.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

cution, many missionaries approved of France's diplomatic and military intervention or at least saw it as inevitable, a view shared by at least one newspaper in papal Rome¹⁹². Some even offered a mystical interpretation of the opening of five treaty ports, comparing them to five wounds meant to punish China by bleeding her white, but through which – like Christ's five wounds suffered on the cross – salvation would be delivered to her people¹⁹³. Only later the alternative view began to be aired that “the opening of China to European civilization and to Christianity” could not be achieved by armies and soldiers, but only “by the zeal of Catholics, of Missionaries, and of Friars, who bathed the Orient in their own blood and would continue to do so, on account of persecution”:

“[...] la Cina, che volle calpestare i trattati di quattordici anni fa, verrà condotta più ancora dalla mano di Dio, che dal valore europeo a segnare altri trattati più liberali [...] pei suoi sudditi cristiani, e per gli apostoli che a lei, per farla veramente impero celeste, le invia la cattolica Europa”¹⁹⁴.

Mid 19th century missionaries, who had seen their own and their flock martyred in great numbers as a result of anti-Christian edicts in earlier decades, lacked the mindset and the knowledge to detect in these violent actions an attempt by China's officialdom to defend the stability of the country's centuries-old society and of the State, threatened by a religion that in Confucian terms could be considered as “deviant”¹⁹⁵. And now, these same missionaries, who witnessed the significant change in the position of and the opportunities available to Catholic Missions as result of direct Western intervention, failed to anticipate or properly evaluate the negative effects of the “unequal treaties”, of their own real or suspected collusion with imperialist powers in the humiliation of China or the occupation of chunks – however small – of Chinese territory, of the French Protectorate, of the rumours and outrageous accusations commonly spread by and believed among the people, of the often perfidious reaction of the gentry and local officials, and of the legal ineffectiveness of the protection clauses. Increased xenophobia was a constant feature of violence perpetrated against missionaries in the second half of the 19th century¹⁹⁶.

¹⁹² See “Roma e la Cina” in “Museo” 44 (1858) 701-702, drawn from a non-official commentary in praise of missionary work published by Rome's *Giornale di Roma*.

¹⁹³ “Annali Propagazione della Fede” 21 (1849) 19-20.

¹⁹⁴ “Esposizione” 11 (1858) 165.

¹⁹⁵ Paul A. COHEN, *China and Christianity. The missionary movement and the growth of Chinese antiforeignism, 1860-1870*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1963.

¹⁹⁶ These issues, previously discussed by selected authors, are now beginning to be debated by a wider range of scholars. See Angelo S. LAZZAROTTO et al., *The Boxer Movement*

2. *La colta Europa*. Expressions such as “la colta Europa”, or “cultured Europe”, and the equivalent “Catholic Europe” that Don Bosco used in the 1884 dream, were ready-made expressions. They were used in contraposition to the “barbarous ways” of pagan China, of which the prolonged tortures of missionaries or the exposure and sale of children were examples, repulsive to the Christian conscience. It is but an illustration of a more generalized clash between the two cultures.

3. *Christian versus Pagan culture*. The most startling passage is the comparison at war of a society born of Christianity with one born of Paganism. The passage is not in the original draft penned by Bonetti and later marginally corrected by Don Bosco, but was added at some later stage as a lesson from history possibly at his suggestion¹⁹⁷. The idea has a parallel in – or may even have been taken from – a letter written by a missionary from China and quoted in *Museo delle Missioni Cattoliche*. In it the conflict is seen from a theological point of view not as a contention among nations, but as one instance of a wider clash, the clash between idolatry and true religion. Words and concepts closely resemble the ones Don Bosco expressed:

“Quivi la guerra è imminente, e dall’esito della guerra dipende in gran parte la sorte delle nostre Missioni. Quindi io non la considero come una vertenza [...] tra nazione e nazione, ma come un affare generale che ...interessa tutto il mondo. Vi veggo come alle prese i due imperi del bene e del male, del cristianesimo e dell’idolatria, che vengono a disputarsi questa gran parte del mondo.

Mi frutta un piacere indescrivibile il vedervi la Francia, protettrice provvidenziale della religione, che vi piglia parte, e, d’accordo coll’Inghilterra, tenta aprirsi un passo in questo vasto impero, per tradurre in atto i disegni di misericordia che la Provvidenza ha tracciato per la Cina e per gli Stati vicini”¹⁹⁸.

4. *Resumption of religious activity*. With the end of persecution came the reorganization of the Church. Again, the details – “build churches, open schools, orphanages and hospitals” – are not in Bonetti’s original, nor is the conclusion of the paragraph regarding “the august ceremonies” presided over by the bishop of Peking even in the presence of local civil authorities. The building of a new society through the setting up of institutions promoted by

and Christianity in China. Taipei, Fujen University 2004. Agostino GIOVAGNOLI - Elisa GIUNIPERO (ed.), *The Catholic Church and the Chinese World between colonialism and evangelization (1840-1911)*. Roma, Urbaniana University Press 2005.

¹⁹⁷ ASC, *Storia Ecclesiastica (1870)*, manoscritto Bonetti, A2350400, microscheda 235 C 8.

¹⁹⁸ “Museo” 8 (1858) 119.

Christian charity is a typically Bosconian concept¹⁹⁹. Also this addition may have been inspired by reports of the reopening of Peking churches to the cult and the solemn ceremonies jointly conducted therein by invading corps and formerly suppressed local Christians: “The metropolis of the Celestial Empire is open to Catholicism. High on top of the ancient cathedral flies the flag of our religion, the cross of Christ”, reported an editorial in the *Museo*²⁰⁰. In Don Bosco’s mind, as in that of Catholics of his time, there could be no better ending to the Chinese persecution than the one occasioned by God’s providential intervention through unexpected means: the locals were finally free to practice religion, civilized society was being promoted and the Church had triumphed.

The “religious” vision that prevailed in the Valdocco establishment as regards political events of the type just described is evident from a rare editorial dedicated to international politics, the carving up of Africa by European Powers, published in the *Bollettino Salesiano* of March 1885 under the title: *Civilization and Religion*. The race for the colonial conquest of Africa was on: Britain had difficulties in containing an Islamic revolt in Sudan; the representatives of European Powers were meeting in Berlin to try to find an accord on Congo; all countries were preparing for military and exploratory expeditions of the Black Continent ostensibly in order to put an end to slavery and promote the advance of civilization. If there was a worthy motive to start a war, for the editor this was it: to bring to an end the shameful exploitation of pitiable human beings that had been going on for centuries just across the Mediterranean. The natural law demanded it. It seemed like an endorsement of Colonization that was picking up momentum precisely in those years, when the evils of this movement were not yet evident. And yet, the *Bollettino* was predicting disaster unless the work of civilization was accompanied by religion, because “there cannot be true civilization without true religion; nay, civilization and religion are synonyms”. Only religion can change people’s hearts. For this reason a double expedition of a different kind was being readied: missionaries were being sent out from Rome and from Turin carrying the Gospel of Jesus Christ to China and Patagonia²⁰¹.

¹⁹⁹ P. BRAIDO, *Progetto operativo...*, p. 26.

²⁰⁰ “Museo” 1-5 (1860) 1-3; 24-28 (1861) 117; “Annali Propagazione della Fede” 34 (1862) 75-79.

²⁰¹ *Civiltà e religione*, in “Bollettino Salesiano”, 3 (1885) 33-34. The reference is to the 11th missionary expedition from Valdocco to Patagonia and to the first expedition of the *Pontifical Seminary of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul for the Foreign Missions* to China in 1885 ahead of the creation of the new Vicariate Apostolic of South Henan. Gianni CRIVELLER, *The Roman Seminary in Southern China*, in A. GIOVAGNOLI – E. GIUNIPERO (ed.), *The Catholic Church...*, pp. 182-183.

Don Bosco believed in the call to spread the faith, to evangelize and civilize, to bring salvation and progress – the two being inseparable – to spread the Kingdom and build the Church according to the blue print that was familiar to him. As a proactive member of a Church caught in a struggle with the heirs of 18th century Enlightenment, Don Bosco did not envisage a “pluralistic” world. He believed in and worked all his life with reference to a “Christian utopia”, of which he had his own peculiar vision wherein concern for youth was his fundamental option²⁰². Don Bosco shared this Christian utopia with intransigent contemporary Christians who were opposed to liberalism and fought for a strengthening of Christianization in Europe and the preservation of the Church's visible role in society. Signs of sagging began to appear in Christian Europe as from the late 1870's, but for these Christians faith meant trust in God's providence, salvation and ultimate victory. The Church would weather the storm relying on traditional supernatural values. Don Bosco was, after all, a genuine 19th century believer who thought and expressed himself as one of them on a whole range of topics, including foreign missions, the Christian utopia they wanted to create abroad. What a history manual writes of 19th Century Christians in general, suitably applies to Don Bosco as well:

“Christians [then] were concerned for the eternal salvation of all «those seated in the darkness of the shadow of death». The same spirit inspired the missionaries who travelled through France and those who undertook to take the gospel to the «savages» [...]. Some people wanted to found new Christianities freed from the obstacles which had been encountered in Europe. [...] The utopian socialists also wanted to establish their socialist ideals beyond the seas.

At the same time Christians [...] were concerned to put right many tragic human situations. Evangelization was always accompanied by an attempt to civilize and introduce humanity. The missionaries were teachers, doctors, nurses, sometime scholars [...]. In a perspective centred on Europe, Christians, as Europeans, were hit by the slow progress of civilization in certain countries. In the nineteenth century, all Europeans thought that the world was moving towards a universal civilization. Christianity would, of course, be the religion of this civilization”²⁰³.

One would look in vain for a mention of the concept of “inculturation” in Don Bosco: this perspective is absent in his vision²⁰⁴. It could not have been otherwise. From the point of view of meeting of cultures, the 19th cen-

²⁰² P. BRAIDO, *Progetto operativo...*, 18ff.

²⁰³ Jean COMBY, *How to read Church History*, II. London, SCM Press 1989, pp. 170-171.

²⁰⁴ P. BRAIDO, *Progetto operativo...*, p. 25.

tury missions had been organized in a far less judicious way than in the previous centuries, when Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) spearheaded the method of adaptation. Don Bosco, who knew about the Jesuit missions in China, briefly mentions Francis Xavier in the *Storia Ecclesiastica* but not Ricci. The great Italian missionary's example was lost on the 19th century Church, which showed little interest in understanding China: Ricci's manuscripts, and with them his famed method, would be rediscovered by chance in 1909²⁰⁵. The Christian model proposed by 19th century missionaries remained the one they had known in Europe in local missions, of which foreign missions were a natural extension:

“The salvation offered by the missionary was not located solely in the other world. It began in this world, since faith transformed customs, and Christianity brought the only true happiness. Charitable action stemmed from belief in the incarnation and devotion to Christ, God and humankind: Christianity freed people overseas from misfortune. [...] By proclaiming the gospel the missionary was civilizing the savage and making him abandon his barbarous customs; in the face of the pretensions of the Enlightenment which had thrown Europe into revolutionary chaos, only Christianity could be the basis for a universal civilization. This theme recurred constantly in statements by bishops”²⁰⁶.

Writing for the young Don Bosco saw “Christian utopia”, the vision-mission he and his age shared, as already being fulfilled, virtually at least. In the closing pages of his *Storia Ecclesiastica*, after the announcement of the forced interruption of the Vatican Council on 8 December 1870, he extended an invitation to his young readers to join in prayer, that God in his infinite mercy grant the Church peace and freedom. He noted that the Catholic religion was making great strides all over the world: believers were growing constantly – “by the day” – in America, Japan and even in the “*Celestial Empire*”, notwithstanding occasional persecutions caused by abusive civil administrators. As for the rest, “bishoprics were being established, churches built, seminaries and Christian schools opened”. What were still needed were “missionaries in greater numbers than ever to cultivate the vineyard of the Lord and to lessen the darkness in which people by the thousands were still immersed”²⁰⁷.

²⁰⁵ Practically no publication on Matteo Ricci went to press during the 19th century. After the 1909 casual discovery of Ricci's manuscripts in the Historical Archives of the Society of Jesus by Fr. Pietro Tacchi Venturi SJ, Ricci's *Opere Storiche* were published between 1911 and 1913 by the same Tacchi Venturi and a National Tribute Committee, in 2 volumes: *I Commentarj della Cina*, and *Le lettere dalla Cina, 1580-1610*.

²⁰⁶ J. COMBY, *How to understand the History...*, p. 119.

²⁰⁷ G. BOSCO, *Storia Ecclesiastica (1871)*..., pp. 367-368, OE XXIV, pp. [367-368].

It had been his dream to send his Salesians to China and bring the Gospel message to the numerous people and the youth in need there. He felt he had a contribution to make. In his analysis of the failure of the Jesuit mission, whose many achievements he praised, he dared to express the opinion – for that is what it amounted to – that they would have fared better, had they tried also to gain the support of popular masses by providing education to young people in need.²⁰⁸ In the late afternoon of 20th May 1875, while chatting with his trusted Don Barberis, Don Bosco expressed some interesting ideas, prompted by the presence of a globe that his interlocutor, a teacher of geography, had placed on the library table. Speaking of missions and missionaries, and of the many millions of men and women still awaiting the good news, the conversation fell on Asia:

“Asia – he observed – is inhabited by some 800 million people, very few of whom are Catholic. China (the Chinese Empire) alone has almost 500 million souls, and India almost 200 million. – Oh! How many souls, and how many missionaries would be needed. We think we here in Europe are already something. Think that the population of the Chinese Empire alone exceeds that of Europe by one and a half time! We are used to speak about Piedmont, to study or narrate her history and observe her progress and regress, and Piedmont is but a little grain in the midst of a lake? And what about this atom, our Oratory here in Valdocco? – Don Bosco resumed with a smile – and yet it keeps us very busy and from this little corner we plan to send people here and there, etc.”²⁰⁹.

4. Epilogue and conclusions

Don Bosco died on 31st January 1888. During his last days on earth, the missions of Asia were very much in his thoughts as an unfulfilled dream that God, however, would certainly accomplish in due time. The Salesian community was quite aware of his concerns in this respect: for the two following decades the Patagonia and China missions would top the Superiors' agenda²¹⁰. Barely two years after Don Bosco's death Don Arturo Conelli (1864-1924), then a young priest, started setting in motion a process of

²⁰⁸ *Documenti* XVII p. 440, in ASC A066; MB XII 280. Original source: *Cronichetta*, 12.08.1876, ASC A0000108.

²⁰⁹ *Cronichetta*, ASC A0000101, p. 21.

²¹⁰ Cogliolo to Barberis, 16.07.1910, in ASC B913. *Pietro Cogliolo* (1866-1932) played an essential role in arranging the first expedition to China. As Provincial of Portugal he visited Macao in early 1910. After the Portuguese revolution he worked in S. Africa and in his last years was at the service of the Holy See in Central America.

lengthy negotiations that would see the Salesians landing in Macao in 1906. The dreams, the words and especially the *Spiritual Testament* of Don Bosco would provide a strong, charismatic stimulus within the Congregation to see his “prophecies” come true. Each stage in the development of Salesian work in China – Shiuchow (1918), Shanghai (1924), Hong Kong (1927), and especially Peking (1946) – would be seen as a new dawn of the “time of wonders that Mary Help of Christians would work in China”²¹¹. Superiors and missionaries, with rare exceptions, were united in this conviction.

By contrast, it is the prevalent opinion nowadays that much of what Don Bosco foresaw about China has yet to come²¹². Dreams and “prophecies” are periodically revisited, especially in this jubilee year when the Salesians celebrate the 100th Anniversary of their presence in China (1906-2006)²¹³. Following Don Bosco’s repeated cautionary advice, in 1876 and 1885, present and past historians warn that great prudence is required when dealing with this phenomenon of “prophetic” dreams, whose reality and importance in the life of Don Bosco one cannot deny but whose nature and full implications elude us²¹⁴. Don Bosco himself did not have an easy task in interpreting his dreams. It took him 4-5 years to find a key to the interpretation of the dream of 1871-1872. Evidence in hand, we have been able to conclude that even his interpretations were unavoidably incomplete and occasionally incorrect. Over time his attitude towards his dreams changed, in both directions: from enthusiastic to cautious evaluation and from prudent stance to deep conviction. He learned to temper his enthusiasm on discovering that his early appraisal did not match reality in Patagonia. Made wiser by experience, he drew far more generalized interpretations from his dreams on China and suggested an open-ended timeframe for their fulfilment.

That Don Bosco experienced this kind of difficulty should not come as a surprise, as Don Alberto Caviglia remarked very early on:

“To Don Bosco dreams hinted at things in the future, as already finished [...]. But they never explained how to reach those objectives, nor where and when

²¹¹ Versiglia to Albera, 28.02.1920, in ASC A3510522. Other sample references: Fochesato to Rinaldi 24.12.1923 ASC F156; Caravario to his mother 20.10.1925 published in Callisto CARAVARIO, *Mia carissima mamma. Cinque anni di corrispondenza del giovane Salesiano martire in Cina (ottobre 1924 - febbraio 1930)*, a cura di Francesco Motto. Roma, LAS 2000, pp. 21, 74; Benato, letter of 27.10.1946 reported in *Verballi delle riunioni capitolari*, vol. VII, p. 604, in ASC D875.

²¹² Egidio VIGANÒ, *Da Pechino verso l’88*, in ACS 323 (1987) 8-10. A. LENTI, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, pp. 121-122.

²¹³ Carlo SOCOL – Domingos LEONG, *The dream continues...: Centenary of the Salesians of Don Bosco in China*. Hong Kong 2006.

²¹⁴ P. STELLA, presentazione to C. ROMERO, *I sogni di Don Bosco...*, pp. 5-6.

he would have found the means, nor in what way he would overcome the obstacles. He knew he would get there, and perhaps he only knew that either he or his sons would get there. The rest, and this was neither trifling nor simple, he had to manage by himself, and, from what we know, without specific or concrete awareness he was carrying out what the dream had shown him”²¹⁵.

At the same time one should be ready to admit, as others have done before, that Don Bosco could be reserving some surprises. What Cagliero heard from Don Bosco in 1888 on his death bed – the recommendation to “take care of Asia” – was not inserted in the diary of Don Bosco’s final illness “uniquely because at that time it appeared unlikely. But after 30 years it has become a reality”. Don Ceria, after having offered his interpretation of the missionary dreams and especially that of 1886, accepting as good Cimatti’s suggestion that Don Bosco had in fact seen Japan and not Macao, concludes: “Let us leave to the Salesians who will live 150-200 years from 1885, as the dream says, the pleasant task of witnessing the complete fulfilment of what was shown in the four missionary dreams. There are too many instances in which Don Bosco’s predictions have come true for us to doubt those that have not”²¹⁶. And so when revisiting the missionary dreams a blend of expectation, reverence and critical realism would not be out of place. Historians readily admit that certain aspects of the complex phenomenon elude their research and remain out of their reach, and that in certain cases there are just not enough reliable elements to formulate a fair judgment. An overall assessment is a long way off.

That said, and in the meantime, some conclusions may be drawn:

Sources. Others have written on the topic that the present study is intended to shed light on, viz. C. Kirschner and M. Rassiga²¹⁷. Their basic approach was that of stringing together documents and information retrieved from the Biographical Memoirs and other printed sources without even a minimum of critical attitude. Problems related to this methodology, particularly the use of the Biographical Memoirs as an unquestionable source, raised a long time ago and recently highlighted by F. Motto, did not seem to touch them²¹⁸. In contrast this study has attempted to revisit traditional sources, to

²¹⁵ A. CAVIGLIA, *Don Bosco. Profilo storico...*, p. 73.

²¹⁶ E. CERIA, *Annali* I 559.

²¹⁷ Carlos A. KIRSCHNER, *Dom Bosco e a China: contributo para a História dos Salesianos*. Macau 1970, pp. 7-85; Mario RASSIGA, *Breve cenno storico sull’Opera Salesiana in Cina*. I. Hong Kong 1973, pp. 1-10.

²¹⁸ Francesco MOTTO, *A proposito di alcune recenti pubblicazioni*, in RSS 47 (2006) 291-300.

consult as far as possible the originals, subject them to critical scrutiny, albeit provisional and incomplete, and set them in their context. A wealth of unpublished or hitherto overlooked material was also used.

Results. Even this partial critical approach to the dreams and the words attributed to Don Bosco, as well as the use of additional sources, have forced us to re-write certain episodes and certain assessments of traditional historiography: “Bellia’s testimony about Don Bosco’s early desire to send clerics and priests to work in Patagonia, or Lemoyne’s proffered reason for the breaking up of negotiations with T. Raimondi to send Salesians to Hong Kong are the clearest examples. The step by step reconstruction of these negotiations, right at the time when Don Bosco was preparing to set his Society on an overseas expansion, reveals some of the undercurrents of his determined struggle to have the Salesian Constitutions approved and puts into perspective the swift decision to opt for a first foray in Argentina, the first thought of which we set around the first decade of June 1874, to be followed shortly thereafter by expansion in Asia. The second part of the plan, as we know, did not work out, and only his dreams and long term vision have come down to us. Similarly, the problematic surrounding the nature, textual genesis, *versio recepta* and interpretation of dreams and related sayings of Don Bosco was highlighted by even the most benevolent critical approach, a fact that reinforces the calls for the dismantling, or at least the reassessment, of a prevailing, overdone spiritual bias. Words that were univocally interpreted as pertaining to the supernatural sphere have been seen as what they most likely are, i.e. compliments or stereotypes. Subjecting circumstantial evidence to critical verification and evaluation has yielded new data about, and brought new insights into, Don Bosco’s missionary call, understanding, planning and initiatives, his vision and knowledge of China, his mind frame, the cultural richness and limits he shared with the 19th century European ecclesial establishment.

As a consequence, the person at the centre of our investigation stands out before our eyes in a more credible mixture of light and shade, a Don Bosco who grows and matures according to the laws of gradualism; who struggles to identify the path he has set out on; who has to learn to temper the enthusiasm of his visionary character; who certainly is not the only recipient of the abundant charisms that God distributes for the furthering of the Kingdom; whose intuitions are in certain respects ahead of others, but at other times not so forward looking as those of other contemporary men of God. On the one side we have the face of Don Bosco we are familiar with: the priest, the shepherd, the father and teacher, his spiritual dimension, his thirst for souls, a life constantly

inspired by God, his awareness of the needs of the times, his total, dynamic, creative and flexible dedication to youth, his untiring and daring action, his capacity to dream and to let himself be driven by ideals while always remaining extremely practical and down to earth... On the other, more human side, the study has revealed or confirmed some of his less familiar traits and characteristics, which he shared with the people of his time, including the cultural limits and blind spots typical of 19th century culture.

Ordinary and extraordinary. For obvious reasons this study has not touched on the “extraordinary” in the life of Don Bosco. Important as this aspect may be, his portrait would not be a faithful one without the more ordinary aspects of his daily life, those that – incidentally – bring him closer to us. God, who endowed him with many gifts, did not spare him the toil of struggling, of searching, of discerning, of growing and of committing mistakes²¹⁹.

Words and facts. What Don Bosco said, or wrote or dreamt about China is populated with lots of ...words. He did not personally accomplish anything concrete and had to limit himself to foreseeing future development, which would be achieved under certain conditions and at an undetermined time. And yet his words and dreams spoke with the strength of fact, because they represented what he believed in most and lived daily and constantly. Underlying the dreams there is a certainty regarding their content and meaning born not of theophany, but of his radical trust in Divine Providence, his faithful and constant attention to God's call and the opportunities that presented themselves. Factual also is the constant daring with which he undertook his many and challenging enterprises, starting from his concern for poor and abandoned youth – even those in mission lands – the homeless, the orphaned, the outcast, those in danger or in need of evangelization.

Don Bosco and China. Don Bosco's interest in China was born of his human growth, faith experience and charismatic call, the three unified by one common denominator: his desire and resolve to do his utmost for the “salvation of souls”, especially of poor and abandoned children and peoples in need of evangelization, wherever they might be. In his formative years and early priesthood it grew out of his ecclesial sensitivity; in full “programmatic stage”, the mid 70's, it became a determined search for a concrete commitment by his Society; in later years, from 1883 onwards, it grew as a desire tempered by realism and anxiety and became a vision and ideal interspersed

²¹⁹ Francesco MOTTO, *Introduzione* to Giovanni BOSCO, *Epistolario II (1864-1868)*. Roma, LAS 1996, p. 9.

with warnings addressed to present and future generations, but always forward looking, always projected towards the future, to attain universal expansion²²⁰.

Don Bosco's dreams and words about China have to be seen within this concept of the universalism of the Salesian mission. They are clearly the result of his burning desire to bring salvation to youth in need, wherever they are to be found, and hence they are a reflection and an expression of God's will, that "not one of the little ones be lost" (Mt. 18,14). Seen from Valdocco China represents one extreme end of the earth. Don Bosco envisaged this universal mission of bringing God's love to youth the world over: Peking as Valparaiso and Valdocco! Did Don Bosco have any preference for China, seeing how much he thought and how often he spoke about it? Any such preference could only be understood within his preferential choice for the young and people in need: young and "savages" are most in need, and populous, isolated China had particularly many of both.

It was Don Bosco's inner conviction that the Salesian Congregation would definitely be one day at work in China, on condition that it remain faithful to its charism: his dreams and words are to be seen above all as a powerful call to faithfulness. The Congregation shall see the marvels promised. How and when, no one can tell, but for him they will certainly be "meraviglie mai credute", i.e. "incredible things".

²²⁰ "The thought of an imminent end was [...] occupying his mind so much that he drafted a circular letter on the 18th [February 1884] which his successor was to send to the Salesian cooperators in the event of his death. He then told Fr. [...] Lemoyne, "I can see before me the progress that our Congregation will make in the future. From South America, it will spread to the North, and then it will extend to Austria, Hungary and Russia, then to India, Ceylon, and China. Within a space of a hundred years from now, what a wonderful development we would be able to see for the Salesian if we were still alive! [...] Yet only two or three bad Salesians would be enough to lead astray all the others. If we remain faithful to the ordinary Christian virtues, what a magnificent future God has in store for us". BM XVII 15.