

acts

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

FROM PEKING TOWARDS 88

Introduction. - The Feast of the Assumption at Peking. - Don Bosco's missionary dreams. - The two salesian protomartyrs. - Brief contacts with the reality of Chinese culture. - The presence of «church» at the present day. - In communion of hope with the universal Church. - The outlook for our Hong Kong Province. - The importance of suffering for apostolic action. - Conclusion.

Rome, Feast of St Bartholomew, 24 August 1987

My dear confreres,

I have just returned from mainland China: Peking, Canton, Shiuchow, with a brief visit at the end to Macau and Hong Kong. I am very grateful to those who prepared the details of the journey with such dedication and intelligence.

The Asian continent has always led me to meditate deeply on the mystery of the Church and its charismata. And nowhere was this more the case than in China: a people with a population of more than one thousand million! Two thousand years after Pentecost the vast majority of these people are still unaware of the grace and redeeming news of the Risen Christ. Recently they have lived through a «cultural revolution» which has placed them on a kind of new launching pad, even though there is an evident need to find a good and abundant fuel able to bring about the actual take-off into the future. There is growing up at the present day, and it springs from the insuppressible hope in the human

heart, a kind of intuition that there are better times ahead.

The story of the Chinese missions is a long one. It began with the first contacts made by a group of Nestorian monks in the seventh century. These were followed by various approaches in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, and by subsequent initiatives of the Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, the Paris Foreign Missionary Society, the Augustinians, Divine Word Fathers, the Scheut religious, Trappists, Marists, various native Congregations, and finally by several religious institutes in the twentieth century, including our Salesian Family. It is a long and tormented story, and is linked unfortunately (even though in general only incidentally) with sad colonializing initiatives by some European powers.

How much sacrifice there has been, and how many martyrs!

On the other hand the widespread existence of non-christian religions, rooted in the local culture of ancestor worship and permeated with alienating aspects linked with mythology and superstition, has destroyed the authenticity of the religious sense of the objective realism of the «history of salvation», centred on man.

The cultural revolution made every effort to root out everything that was religious («the opium of the people») and foreign («colonialism»), and has left in its wake an immense and certainly fertile field to be cleansed, ploughed and sown.

The first period of our salesian presence in mainland China — from 1906 to the early 50's — saw the birth of Don Bosco's charisma among the poor and little ones in conjunction with the aspirations and needs of Chinese youth, giving rise to pre-

cious vocations with a capacity for heroic witness and perseverance. Some confreres from that period are still in the mainland, providing in a wonderful way shining signs of fidelity and fruitful seeds of rebirth.

It seems that the Chinese people are now on the threshold of a new era of progress; one feels that the pulse of the nation is throbbing with a rhythm previously unknown. Could it be that the great hour of the country's resurgence is about to strike?

Numerous seeds have already been buried in China's soil;¹ the Church too has rethought in depth the nature of her mission and the manner of carrying it out, after recognizing the many shortcomings of recent centuries. Vatican II has introduced big changes into missiology and in the kind of ecclesial activity of the various charismata; on account of this, missionaries of today and tomorrow (ourselves among them) will be able to respond in more adequate fashion to the appeal which is already beginning to be heard from the great and promising yearning of Chinese hearts.

Our holy Founder Don Bosco saw in a dream the development of the salesian presence, even though he added (but 100 years have already gone by since then) «but the time is in the hands of God».²

The journey which I have just made as Rector Major was meant as a pilgrimage. Four days in Peking, another four in Canton and Shiuchow, and finally nearly two days in Macau and Hong Kong. The main objectives were:

- to celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption in Peking Cathedral;
- to consider once again the two missionary

¹ cf. Jn 12,24;
1 Cor 15,37

² cf. MB 18,71-74

- dreams of Don Bosco in the light of the heroic fidelity of the Chinese confreres;
- to venerate and express our gratitude to our protomartyrs;
 - to get to know some more significant expressions of the Chinese culture of yesterday and of the colossal tasks facing the present new order;
 - to make contact if possible with representatives of the local Churches;
 - to share the fervent desire of the universal Church for a growth of faith among the Chinese people;
 - to see at first hand the merit of the salesian province of Hong Kong and to share the hopes of the confreres;
 - to meditate on the power of the passion and the cross.

It was a very meaningful journey, made in peace and freedom and one that opened up undreamt of perspectives.

It will be useful, I think, to offer you some reflections on each of these points. They will help us to live the Marian Year with more practical realism and to reawaken our resolutions of fidelity for '88.

The feast of the Assumption at Peking

From Rome I flew directly to Peking.

In this capital during the Marian Year, I wanted to celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven: the event which marks the beginning of her maternal work as Help of Christians through the centuries.

I had made my preparations at Fatima, during the Team Visit to the provinces of Spain and Portu-

gal; during that week I had prayed every day to Our Lady. I wanted to represent the Salesian Family of the whole world in making a special Act of Entrustment of all the young people of China to Mary Help of Christians in Peking Cathedral which is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception.

And so I went to the cathedral (or southern church). I was accompanied by the Regional Councillor (Fr Thomas Panakezham) and by my brother (Fr Angelo), and kneeling in the second bench on the left and in the presence of these two competent witnesses I recited the formula of Entrustment, which I include as an appendix to this letter. We then took part together as members of the faithful in the Mass celebrated in Latin.

Looking around the cathedral we saw fixed to one of the columns near the entrance the 1987 calendar for the so-called «Patriotic Association» which manages the churches open to the public: at the centre it had a beautiful coloured picture of Mary Help of Christians, exactly like that of Valdocco. It seemed to us a significant indication.

We knew already that on 19 January 1949 Mary Help of Christians had been proclaimed the special Patroness of Peking. But we had confirmation of something else: in the first Synod of the Chinese Bishops (14 May - 12 June 1924) the entire people of China were entrusted to Mary invoked as «Auxilium Christianorum, Mater gratiae, Celestis Sinarum Regina».

At Shanghai, on the famous hill of Zo-sè, there is a splendid basilica dedicated precisely to Mary «Auxilium Christianorum»; the statue, identical with that of Turin, rises in motherly fashion above the high altar. Already in the previous century³ a hexagonal chapel had been built on this hill in her

honour: «Our Lady of Zo-sè»; the faithful used to flock there to seek her help and to thank her for it afterwards.

Don Bosco himself makes mention of it in a little booklet entitled «Nine days consecrated to the august Mother of the Saviour under the title of Mary Help of Christians».⁴ Giving an example of the motherly efficacy of Our Lady he wrote: «The name of Mary Help of Christians gloriously resounds already even in far distant countries. It seems indeed that God wishes to draw to himself the whole world through the wonders worked in favour of unbelievers through the intercession of his divine Mother.» And he quotes two facts which took place on the hill of Zo-sè.⁵

My pilgrimage to Peking was intended to have this Marian aspect in the forefront, as a strongly significant element. The outcome of our missionary activity will always be linked with a sincere and trusting devotion to the Mother of God and of the Church.

Don Bosco's missionary dreams

Before leaving Rome I had read once again with careful attention Don Bosco's five great missionary dreams: about Patagonia,⁶ South America,⁷ a large number of missionary presences,⁸ Africa, Asia, Australia and Oceania,⁹ and the trans-continental line stretching from Valparaiso to Peking.¹⁰

Don Bosco spoke explicitly of China in narrating the fourth and fifth dream. He saw his sons present there in big numbers and carrying out an efficacious work of evangelization. He was convinced that Our Lady wanted his followers for the young

⁴ 1870

⁵ cf. GIOVANNI BOSCO: *Opere edite, ristampa anastatica*, LAS Roma 1977, vol. XXII, p. [253]; [333-334]

⁶ 1872; BM 10,46-48

⁷ 1883; MB 16,385-398

⁸ January 1885;

MB 17,299-305

⁹ July 1885;

MB 17,643-647

¹⁰ 1886; MB 18,72-74

people of that country too. «If I had twenty missionaries to send to China», he said after narrating the fourth dream, «they would certainly receive a triumphal welcome there, despite the persecution». ¹¹

¹¹ MB 17,647

And Don Lemoyne, to whom Don Bosco spoke about his dream of salesian works stretching from Chile to Peking, quotes him as saying quietly but in a penetrating manner: «When the Salesians get to China, they will find themselves on both banks of the Peking river. One group will come to the left bank through the heart of the country. The other group will come to the right bank from the coastlands. And when they meet and shake hands with each other, what a glorious day that will be for our Congregation! But the time is in the hands of God!». ¹²

¹² MB 18,74

I went to that river and stood on the famous bridge which crosses it. (Marco Polo described it in 'Milione'). And later on when I told the confreres of the province that I was a Rector Major who had come from Valparaiso and Santiago and had reached Peking, I saw on their faces both emotion and great hope.

For the moment there remain in mainland China only a handful of confreres who have borne witness with a heroic fidelity lasting more than thirty years to the love of the Chinese for Don Bosco's charisma and their unfailing conviction of having experienced through their profession the attraction and efficacy of the Lord's Gospel for the youth of their immense country; they now see appearing on the horizon new possibilities with great promise.

In the course of my travels I have been able to verify to some extent in the different continents the prophetic truth of the missionary dreams of our

Father, and I have felt in my heart (and I have seen that the confreres there feel the same thing) that this truth extends also to the future, thus giving weight to the famous expression of Don Bosco: «If only I could embalm and keep alive some fifty Salesians of the kind we have at the moment, in five hundred years time they would see what an amazing destiny Providence has reserved for us, if we remain faithful. ... There may arise some hothead bent on destroying us, but they will be isolated cases without support from others. Everything depends on the Salesians not allowing themselves to give way to the attractions of ease and comfort and so avoid hard work».¹³

¹³ MB 17,645

I prayed in Peking that throughout the Congregation (and this is where the special spiritual contribution for '88 comes in) the identity of the Founder's charism may grow and be intensified in the confreres: the mystique or contemplative dimension of «da mihi animas», and the daily ascetical practice of «work and temperance».

The two salesian protomartyrs

When I arrived in Hong Kong from the Chinese mainland I found awaiting me a letter that had been written on 21 August by an old and well deserving confrere who had worked for many years in that province. «Dearly beloved Father,» he wrote, «welcome to the land of Don Bosco's dreams. The soil of China, already bedewed by the blood of *eleven* confreres, is preparing great consolations and triumphs for the sons of Don Bosco... but many sacrifices are still needed, as Blessed Mgr Versiglia used always to say».

One of the objectives of my visit to mainland China had been precisely that of visiting the places where Mgr Versiglia and Fr Caravario had carried out their apostolic work and where they had been martyred. This is why I had invited my brother Angelo, Provincial of the Central Province based at Turin, to accompany me. Seven years ago he had been miraculously cured of an inoperable cancer after insistent prayers of the confrere of the Milan province (of which he was then Provincial) to our two martyrs.

We have been to the places where they worked and gave their testimony; we prayed in gratitude for the past and asked that the seed of these martyrs might be fertile for the future, and we were able to concelebrate a sung Eucharist with Gregorian chant in a form which though rather isolated was very moving and meaningful, in the little church of Saint Teresa in Shiuchow. We were accompanied by the subdued voices from outside of some «Sisters Announcers of the Lord» (the local Sisters founded by Mgr Versiglia); they were not allowed to come inside.

We recalled the words of John Paul II in his homily at the Mass of Beatification of the two martyrs in St Peter's Square in Rome:¹⁴ «In every age and in every place martyrdom is an offering of love for the brethren and especially for the people for whose benefit the martyr offers himself. The blood of the two Beati is therefore at the foundation of the Chinese Church, as the blood of Peter is at the foundation of the Church of Rome. We must therefore understand the witness of their love and their service as a sign of the profound harmony between the Gospel and the highest values of the culture and spirituality of China. In this witness, the sacri-

¹⁴ 15 May, Sunday after Ascension

fice offered to God and the gift of self made to the people and to the Church of China cannot be separated». ¹⁵

I have been able to note in the brief history of this province, more than in any other, the abundant presence of martyrdom and suffering which is the expression and incontrovertible witness of salesian love for the youth and people of China.

And I thought to myself during my short stay at Shiuchow: the sons of Don Bosco have always had an intense love for the boys and girls, the young men and women, and the simple people of the fields and towns of the great and numerous Chinese people. They love them now and will always do so in the future. In the light of these two martyrs, the Salesian will never be a stranger in China because he is a disciple of Christ who has chosen as the beloved country of his vocation also the culture, the history, the projects, hopes and difficulties of this dear peace-loving people which yearns for truth.

I learned of various Chinese confreres, priests and brothers, who have been able not only to accept but to live in hope a «passion» which has gone on for more than thirty years; to some of them I have been able to speak. They accept the will of the Father in their regard as a grace. More than one of them has already given his life; others continue their witness in a form which is humbly sublime.

In a letter of one of them, written on the 8th of the present month, I read with amazement: «I have been here, far away and alone, for 33 years now! Nothing has changed. But every day without fail I have recourse to Mary Help of Christians, to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament through a spiritual communion, and I pray for the Pope (to sustain him

¹⁵ *Oss. Rom.* (Eng. edtn.) 23 May 1983

with fidelity), thinking always that the Superiors and my brothers in the great family of St John Bosco cannot forget me in the midst of my tribulations; and so I do not feel either sad or alone, in fact I feel fortunate because I am sure they will never forget this poor creature; and this gives me strength... Certainly there is much that I could say, but I can sum it all up in a single thought: I send you my affection and gratitude for everything, everything. I have heard from you that next year there will be great celebrations for the centenary of the death of Don Bosco. Every day in my evening prayer I recite the prayer: 'O Father and Teacher of youth, St John Bosco...'» He has been my great benefactor ever since I was a young boy, and I can never forget him... Mary Help of Christians, help us to come safely through this raging sea. My heartfelt greetings for the Feast of the Assumption!».

My dear confreres, it will not be easy to surpass this dear Chinese Brother in our preparation for the celebrations of '88.

Brief contacts with the reality of Chinese culture

In Peking especially I was able to see some of the wonderful manifestations of Chinese culture of the past and also certain imposing initiatives of the present day. One is impressed by the originality, magnificence, grandeur, skill and careful attention to knowledge which, together with rich traditional values in a familiar context of social courtesy linked with constant application to work, make one think of the truth of what John Paul II said in a meeting to mark the 4th centenary of Fr Matthew Ricci:

«The particular connotations which mark civilization and culture are among the most well known and celebrated in the world, autonomous in their originality of thought, of linguistic and literary expression, of tradition and usage, to such an extent that they constitute one of the richest centres of the elaboration of intellectual and human values of universal history».¹⁶

To give you an idea of what I am referring to, the more important places we visited were: the Temple of Heaven, the Gate of Peace, the Forbidden City (or Imperial Palace), the Astronomical Museum, the Summer Palace (of the Empress), the Ming Tombs, the Great Wall, the vast Square and Mausoleum of Mao Tse Tung, the immense Hall of the People, the tombs of Fr Matthew Ricci and other missionary astronomers and scientists (as for instance the German P. A. Schall and the Belgian P. Ferdinand Verbiest, who was given a state funeral because of his contributions to knowledge, and the Austrian P. Augusto von Hallerstein), and also some of the more famous Pagodas rich in history.

Going about on foot in the main streets of Peking (which has some ten million inhabitants) and visiting some of the supermarkets, one can become convinced in a practical fashion by the daily crowds of people that the Chinese are the most numerous nation on earth; alone in fact they make up more than a fifth of all humanity.

One is therefore naturally led to think of the particular seriousness of the problems of social cohabitation, of the difficulties experienced in structures at local and state level, of the serious ethical problems and the urgent need to meet all such demands with a proper view of the individual, the family and society.

¹⁶ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1982, V. 3 1982, p. 927-928

Those who bring the Gospel, prompted by the power and light of the Holy Spirit, will have to bear well in mind the particular values of a people so great not only in numbers but also for their glorious if often cruel history of independence and liberation.

The presence of «church»

As I said at the beginning of this letter, in China one immediately feels that christians are a «little flock» immersed in an ocean of brethren who have not yet heard the Good News of the resurrection.

The events of recent decades have resulted in the departure of numerous missionaries, and the flock has been decimated and dispersed: in 1948 there were more than 5,700 priests and nearly 8,000 religious brothers and sisters. Today they are very few: in the whole of Peking there are only 16 priests, all of them members of the Patriotic Association.

Since 1978 the Constitution has asserted that there is personal freedom of belief, and ensures that the State will protect lawful religious activity, provided that it be not under control from abroad. The policy of the «United Front» (which depends on the Party) aims at uniting all the country's efforts in a common endeavour for the relaunching of the nation. While believers of various denominations are guaranteed religious freedom, they are educated and actively involved for the service of the country's common good.

There is a State Department for Religious Affairs, part of whose task is to reorganize and give direction to groups of believers, to rectify errors of

the recent past, to reopen places of worship, and to work for peace, all within the ambit of the Party's religious policy.

The christian faith is certainly still alive with heroic expressions and a silent fertility.

There exists an official «Catholic Patriotic Association» which governs all public places of worship where sacramental rites are celebrated. These are carried out in Latin and in accordance with a pre-conciliar liturgy, as we were able to see for ourselves when participating at Mass and seeing a baptism administered.

We were able to visit five churches open to the public: three in Peking (the cathedral, the northern church and the eastern church); one at Canton (the cathedral) and one at Shiuchow (that of St Teresa of the Child Jesus).

A little conversation in Latin with some of the priests in charge made us feel our brotherhood in the centrality of Christ's mystery, the importance of Mary for salvation history, and the urgent need to be able to communicate the Gospel to the people in a better way.

In communion of hope with the universal Church

Christ and Mary love the people of China, who are called to be the People of God in communion with all the redeemed. The Spirit of the Lord has prompted the universal Church to proclaim in China the Good News of the New Covenant, and is doing so still. Ministers and consecrated members of the universal Church pray, hope and offer themselves for so historic a mission, in the certainty of being able to bring to the country and to all huma-

nity a great good.

Paul VI, in a reference to the courageous faithful of China, said with deep feeling that among them the fact that they were Catholics did not detract in any way from their love for their native land: because membership of the Church in no way weakened but rather strengthened and confirmed their relationship as citizens with their country, and made them guarantors and sharers in its security, its peace and its true progress.¹⁷

Some time ago when I was speaking with Cardinal Sin at Manila (Philippines) and Cardinal Kim at Seoul (Korea), I felt the great interest and ecclesial affection of these two archbishops for the Christian faith in neighbouring China, and their concern to hasten the time and prepare more messengers.

Conversing too with various religious Superiors and Superiors General I have noted a kind of «Chinese» predilection in the future orientation of their charismata.

Peter's Successor looks at China with an intense love as he thinks of the responsibility inherent in his ministry, according to Christ's words: «Go and make disciples of all nations; I am with you always, to the close of the age».¹⁸

John Paul II thinks of our Chinese brothers and sisters who have suffered for the faith. He wrote a letter in Latin to the Bishops of the world asking them to pray for China.¹⁹ In it he said: «The courageous witness (of our Chinese brothers and sisters) can well be compared to that of the Christians in the early ages of the Church. How consoling it is to receive news of the constant and unswerving loyalty of Chinese Catholics to the faith of their forefathers and of their filial attachment to the See of Peter... We entreat the Lord to keep ever more

¹⁷ Address to College of Prop. Fide, 20 Oct. 1963; *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, Tip. Pol. Vat., I 1983, p. 253-254

¹⁸ Mt 28,19-20

¹⁹ 6 January 1982

alive and joyful in them the hope that one day there will be a joyful rebirth of their Church and a new Pentecost of the Spirit which will make the message of Jesus flourish once again in that beloved land».²⁰

In an address to those attending a study congress at the Gregorian University in Rome²¹ for the 4th centenary of Fr Matthew Ricci, he said: «The (universal) Church, aware of the spiritual gifts of every people, cannot fail to see the Chinese people (more numerous than any others in the world) as a great unified reality, a melting pot of lofty traditions and vital leaven, and hence at the same time as a great and promising source of hope».²²

And on the occasion of a documentary being prepared by a television group destined for use in China,²³ John Paul II declared: «The Catholic Church looks on China as a great family, the cradle of noble traditions and vital energies, rooted in the antiquity of its history and culture. The Church looks approvingly on the modernization and progress to which the Chinese people are committed. This was the attitude of the famous Fr Matthew Ricci when he first made contact with China. I am sure that those Chinese who are disciples of Jesus Christ, as was Matthew Ricci, will contribute to the common good of their people by practising the virtues taught by the Gospel, and which have been held in high esteem for centuries in Chinese tradition, such as justice, charity, moderation, wisdom and a sense of fidelity and loyalty».²⁴

And so our Salesian Family feels itself in complete harmony with these ecclesial yearnings, and my journey was intended to contribute to and intensify the awareness that our «sense of Church» implies historically at the present day an opening to

²⁰ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1982, V. 1 1982, p. 183

²¹ 25 October 1982

²² o.c. V. 3, p. 927-928

²³ 24 July 1985

²⁴ o.c. Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1985, VIII. 2 1985, p. 168

prayer, to initiatives and to hope for the Chinese people.

Don Bosco wrote in his own hand in his spiritual testament: «In due time our missions will reach China, and specifically Peking. But let us never forget that we go there for poor and abandoned children. There, among aliens who do not know the true God, will be worked wonders never before believed and his marvels will be displayed for the whole world to see».²⁵

In a conversation with Fr Arthur Conelli at San Benigno in October 1886, our Father spoke of the good his sons would do in China and referred to the capital Peking, to a river which flowed close by it and to a bridge.²⁶

On 8 January 1888, shortly before his death, he spoke of the future missions in China to the Duke of Norfolk who was kneeling at his bedside.²⁷

Later Blessed Mgr Versiglia, pioneer of the salesian presence in China,²⁸ wrote to Don Albera on 12 October 1918: «Our venerable Father Don Bosco, when he dreamt of China, saw two chalices filled with the perspiration and blood of his sons... God grant that I may be able to give back to my Superiors and to our Pious Society the chalice that has been offered to me, and may it be filled at least with my perspiration if not with my blood».²⁹

We have then, both as a Congregation and as the Salesian Family, an ecclesial commitment based on vast Chinese horizons to which we must turn our eyes and for which we must both pray and work.

²⁵ *Spiritual Testament*, Sal Archives 132, book 6; cf. MB 17, 273

²⁶ cf. GUIDO BOSIO: *Martiri in Cina*, LDC Turin 1977, p. 7

²⁷ cf. MB 18,513

²⁸ 1906

²⁹ *Lettere a d. Paolo Albera*, Sal Archives 9,3 Versiglia

The outlook for our Hong Kong Province

At Hong Kong and Macau at the end of the journey I was able to talk with the confreres (some of whom had come from Taiwan), and with the Salesian Family of this Chinese Province. I saw in their eyes gratitude, joy and willing responsibility. The years 1997 and 1999 when the two cities (at present linked with Great Britain and Portugal) pass to the control of mainland China, may appear as a providential perspective for our commitment.

Our very significant meeting concluded with a fervent eucharistic concelebration on the octave day of the Assumption, dedicated liturgically to the commemoration of the Blessed Virgin Mary as Queen. The Immaculate Virgin, said the Council, «was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory when her earthly life was over, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death».³⁰

³⁰ LG 59

This regal quality of Mary makes of her the great Helper of all peoples and Mother of the Church throughout the ages.

We meditated together on the portentous contents of the «Magnificat» and on the silent but inexorable power of the Holy Spirit, while we marvelled at the fact that both the Hong Kong Province and the whole Chinese people and its youth in particular, together with its capital Peking are all specifically entrusted to Mary Help of Christians.

In a climate of hope, the conviction became intensified in our hearts of the strategic importance of this Province, of its history of blood and sweat, and of the extraordinary relevance of its mission at the present day in response to salesian desires

throughout the world.

One of those present at the concelebration prayed that the Chinese people might gradually become «protagonists» in the forthcoming third millennium of christianity.

May Mgr Versiglia and Fr Caravario guide and encourage from heaven the confreres and groups of the Salesian Family of this Province, and intercede efficaciously for them and for all the Chinese people.

The importance of suffering for apostolic action

I am writing this letter on the day in which we commemorate the martyrdom of one of the Twelve, St Bartholomew, who with other members of the Apostolic College is said to have proclaimed the Gospel in Asia.

A mysterious silence has covered the witness and mission of the various Apostles, but it is clear nevertheless that as pillars of the Church they have had an influence on the good of the numerous people of that vast continent, and that this influence will continue in the future.

As I read in the breviary today's second reading, taken from the homilies of St John Chrysostom on the first Letter to the Corinthians, I was struck by the following reflection: the cross exerts an attractive force on all the world. «What tax-gatherers and fishermen had strength to achieve by the grace of God, was something that neither kings nor orators nor philosophers, not (in a word) the whole world searching in all directions, could even imagine. Reflecting on this Paul said: 'The weakness of God is stronger than all men'.³¹ It is clear from this too

³¹ 1 Cor 1,25

that the Gospel is divine. For whence did it strike twelve unlettered men to attempt such great enterprises, men who were living in marshes, or rivers, in desert places, who had never perhaps gone into a city or the public square?».³²

³² Hom 4,3,4;
PG 61,34-36

Martyrdom never fails to exert its attraction; it prompts us to think more frequently and at greater depth of the supreme and indispensable presence of suffering in all christian witness, and in particular in the pastoral style of the salesian charism. I invite you, dear confreres, to read again the circular letter on «Martyrdom and suffering in the apostolic spirit of Don Bosco» which I wrote to you on 24 February 1983.³³

³³ ASC 308, p. 3-23

And so we must not lose courage nor consider ourselves incompetent: we are with God, and for him we are working. We shall not be afraid to add to Project Africa, when the hour decreed by Providence strikes, another and still more demanding frontier, Project China. For the present we have a Province with various groups of the Salesian Family which feels itself committed in this regard: already it is evangelizing, preparing and keeping a watching brief. We feel ourselves united to the confreres of this Province with deep admiration and fraternal solidarity, and while praying for them we also prepare ourselves to give them our collaboration.

Conclusion

Dear confreres, this significant journey of mine was meant to be also a contribution to the intensification of our «salesian spirit» for the celebrations of '88.

When on 14 May next year all our confreres solemnly renew their religious profession, it is my earnest hope that there may be in the heart of each one the same climate of hope and the same apostolic perspective that was in the hearts of Don Bosco and the twenty-two young men who made their profession on 14 May 1862: the social situation was unfavourable, nationalistic enthusiasm was emptying the seminaries, the State was banishing religious, the Pope was considered a hostile temporal sovereign, current opinion on religious orders was generally negative, and yet those twenty-two young men dreamt with Don Bosco of a great future and committed themselves evangelically to stay with him always.

«My dear sons,» said our Father to them on that memorable day, «we are living in troubled times. It may almost seem foolhardy to try to set up a new religious community in this unhappy hour when the world and hell itself are doing their utmost to destroy existing orders. But never mind. I have sound reasons — not merely probable ones — for believing that it is God's will that our Society be born and grow... Who knows but that the Lord may wish to use this Society to achieve much good in his Church!... Let us take courage and work with all our hearts. God is a generous master and will amply reward us. Eternity is long enough for us to rest».³⁴

In a deeply «mystical» atmosphere, Saturday 14 May 1988 will become the most significant day in the centenary celebrations of our holy Founder: it will find us radically committed by an oath of fidelity to his spirit and of active witness of apostolic consecration.

And the difficulties? Well, for those we have the

³⁴ BM 7,103

Help of Christians who is the Madonna for difficult times.

From Peking too there comes to us a pressing invitation to renew for '88 the pastoral charity of «da mihi animas».

To all of you, dear confreres, I send my cordial greetings.

Affectionately in the Lord,

Don F. Viganò

SP
L22

ENTRUSTMENT of the YOUNG PEOPLE OF CHINA to MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS

O Blessed Virgin Mary,
Mother of the Church and Helper of all peoples,
special Patroness of Peking,
we Salesians of Don Bosco,
in pilgrimage to this capital city of CHINA,
on the Solemnity of your ASSUMPTION into heaven,
entrust to YOU
the hopes and struggles of this immense people
who yearn for the truth and so much love peace.

We bring to your maternal attention
the young people who abound
in the various districts of this their hard-working country,
while we remember with joy the promise made to Don Bosco
that his charisma would here find growth
for the good of the people and especially the young.

Intercede for those who bring the Gospel
and entreat the Holy Spirit
that by his power
he may open the horizons of hearts to their message.

We ask you, who have believed
and extolled the great things God has done,
to ensure that the response of faith of Chinese youth
may give light to the world
like the sun which rises in the East!

PEKING, 15 AUGUST 1987



奉獻中華青少年於進教者之佑聖母

吁，至聖無玷童貞！教會之慈母、萬民之助佑、北京之主保，吾等鮑思高慈幼會會士，來到中國首都北京，欣逢妳蒙召升天的慶日，我們將這個擁護真理、熱愛和平之民族的理想和辛勞托付給妳。今天我們愉快地回憶上主給會祖許下的諾言。為使他的神恩澤及這裏的青少年及平民大眾，我們將這個以勤勞見稱的國家、日益茁壯的青少年托妳垂顧。

請妳為宣講福音者轉禱：祈求天主聖神以祂的德能，敞開人的心門，接受福音的訊息。

至聖童貞，妳曾堅信並頌揚上主所作的奇事，請催使中華青少年對信仰的回應，能如東昇之旭日光照世界。

亞孟。