

NURTURING OF VOCATIONS ON THE JOURNEY OF IMPLANTATING THE SALESIAN CHARISM IN THE FIRST 30 YEARS OF THE FMA IN VIETNAM

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Introduction

This contribution to the Salesian History Seminar on the implantation of the Salesian charism in the EAO region has great significance for the Vice-Province “Mary Help of Christians” of Vietnam, which will celebrate 50 years of the presence of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 2011.

This paper focuses on the first thirty years (1960-1990) of the FMA presence in Vietnam. Reflecting on the life and struggles of the Institute in our land during this period, we can see mirrored in the great concern of the pioneers for the care of vocations and the formation of its (future) members the ideals that guided them, the challenges faced and their response to them as well as the results obtained on the journey of implantation and growth of the Salesian charism.

The sources that aided this research include house chronicles from 1961 to 1976, particularly of the house ‘Maria Ausiliatrice’ of Chuk Yuen, Hong Kong; reports, minutes, letters and interviews. These documents are found in the central archives of the FMA in Rome and in the archives of the FMA Chinese Province of Hong Kong. In Vietnam, most of the documents were burnt or lost on account of the tragic political situation during and after the wars. Besides the written documents, there are also the “living documents”, the Daughters of

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Mary Help of Christians from the early period who are still alive, and who have contributed with their personal testimonies regarding the past.

We can say that Mary preceded the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to Vietnam. Fr Mario Acquistapace, Rector of the Salesian orphanage of Go Vap, had been inviting the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from 1959 to meet a group of young ladies being formed by him and by the diocesan parish priest Fr Vu Khiem Cung. The two Provincials – Mother Caterina Moore of the Chinese province, Hong Kong, and Mother Teresa Merlo of the Thai Province – made a visit to Vietnam on 8 March 1960. On 28 October 1960 the first six young ladies went to the Mary Help of Christians Chinese province, Hong Kong, to begin their formation. Hong Kong was the choice of the Apostolic Nuncio, Msgr. Gordon, in view of the state of diplomatic relations in the Asian countries.¹

“The Bishop of Saigon, Msgr. Hien, urged us to come soon to study and to guide the girls before sending them to Hong Kong [...] in this way the sisters could study the language before starting the work [...] Knowing that the sisters and aspirants needed some means to maintain themselves, he offered us a small elementary school in a place called Cho Lon.”²

We shall consider the history of these 30 years in two periods – up to 1975 and after.

1. FMA in Vietnam: the First Period (1961-1975)

The first missionary sisters arrived in Vietnam on 28 May 1961 and lived in a narrow, rented house at Binh Tay, Cho Lon, Saigon. They taught the poor students at the parish school, held classes for

¹ FMA Provincial Archives, Hongkong, *Minutes of the provincial council meeting 18 May 1960.*

² Archivio Generalizia Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, Roma (AGFMA), *Letter Catarina Moore to General Council, Hong Kong, 2 Dec. 1960.*

Chinese children, taught at the Sunday oratory, and accepted aspirants. With all these activities on hand, their income was insufficient. Despite the poverty, however, many parents asked the sisters to accept their daughters as aspirants. The house chronicle states: "Not one day passed without someone coming and asking for their daughter to be accepted as an aspirant."³

On May 13th 1963 the sisters moved into a large building which was the seminary of Vinh Diocese located at Tam Ha, Thu Duc. The community consisted of four sisters: Sr Rosa Zoller (German), Sr Olivia Sadaya (Philippino), Sr Anna Persico and Sr Elena Miravalle (Italians). Sr Maria del Socorro Machuy (Chinese) worked for 3 years in Vietnam and some other missionaries stayed only for some months or a year. Here the sisters opened an aspirantate and a lower secondary school for boarders and external students, grades 6-9. They also taught catechism at the Sunday oratory and at the parish.

The two-year period 1961-1963 marked the first impact of the Salesian charism on the culture and society of Vietnam. It was also the time in which the foundations of the Institute were laid and it began to expand. During this time attention was focused on the preparation of young ladies to be sent to Hong Kong and Italy for formation. The new Archbishop of Saigon, Msgr. Paul Nguyen van Binh recommended the sisters to go and visit the families of these young ladies to know them better. He told the sisters: "Don't hasten to let them (the aspirants) go, because the formation of the first sisters is very important."⁴

In 1966 the Italian government helped build the kindergarten Lina for the children of the area. Besides the 96 aspirants who attended the lower secondary school in the house, there were also external students in the school. The sisters continued to run the Sunday oratory, take Catechism classes, and form catechists.⁵

³ AGFMA, *Chronicles of St. John Bosco community, Cho Lon, 28 May 1961.*

⁴ AGFMA, *Chronicles of St. John Bosco community, Cho Lon, 1967, 1971.*

⁵ AGFMA, *Chronicles of St. John Bosco community, Cho Lon, 29 Dec 1961.*

On 20 May 1967 the first two Vietnamese vocations returned from Hong Kong: Sr Maddalena Ngo thi Minh Chau and Sr Anna Tran thi Chung. On 31 August 1967 two other sisters returned from Italy. As time went on, all the sisters from overseas returned. Those who returned immersed themselves with enthusiasm in the apostolate at Tam Ha as kindergarten teachers, elementary and lower secondary school teachers, as catechists for the boarders, for the Sunday oratory and for the parish, preparing catechumens, and as animators of youth groups and Associations.

1.1. *The Challenges*

1.1.1 Language, the Principal Difficulty

Italian was the language used for communication in this international community of the first missionaries. The relationship with the aspirants and the outsiders was made difficult as not all the aspirants could express themselves in English or French; with the outsiders it was even worse. In a letter to Mother Nilde Maule, Provincial, Sr Caterina Moore explained: "The difficulty of language is the main tripping stone and although the sisters study everyday, they don't seem to master it. It will take some time [...]." ⁶ Later on she added: "It's difficult to initiate the aspirants into the spirit of the Oratory because we have not been able to explain to them this marvelous Salesian treasure due to the lack of mastery of the language. We have turned to our good Salesian priests."⁷

1.1.2 Cultural Differences

It was not easy for the Salesian charism to enter a culture founded on hierarchy and marked by an inborn severity of the people. As a matter of fact, the loving kindness of the Preventive System seemed to contradict the common understanding of the Vietnamese

⁶ AGFMA 13.92 01-1, *Letter Catarina Moore to Mother Nilde, 13 Feb.1962 from Philippines*

⁷ *Ibid.*

who still go by the principle “spare the rod and spoil the child”; for them, “to love is to use the rod and to be sweet is to hate.”

In a letter to Mother Nilde Maule, the Provincial, Sr Caterina Moore wrote in 1962, “I am surprised at the respect the people have for the house of God; everyone prays and if occasionally a child is forgetful and begins to speak or is distracted, a resounding slap from the father or mother or some other adult reminds him of his duty [...]”⁸ In a letter written to Mother General in 1965, Sr Elena Miravalle wrote: “Here they still use the cane to obtain discipline. It shows they don’t know the pedagogy of Father Negri.”⁹

1.1.3 War, Uncertainty and Poverty

War is one of the most tragic events that challenged the projects and influenced the course of the government’s actions. An excerpt from the Chronicles:

“Using the usual tactic, that is lie, the Viet Congs attacked, thus betraying their agreement of ceasefire established and accepted by both parties. From our house one can see columns of smoke rising up from Saigon. The military radio announced the destruction of palaces and offices, launched anguished appeals to the soldiers on leave to report immediately to the barracks [...]. On the night of February 1st there was a fierce battle in Thu Duc and Tam Ha, where our house is located. We find ourselves in the middle of the battle, unable to go out from our dormitory.”¹⁰

“For some time we have not gone for walks; the woods which offer us possible relaxation has become dangerous with even land mines in some places.”¹¹

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ AGFMA 15(96) 08, *Letter Elena Miravalle to Mother General, Tam Ha 24 July 1965.*

¹⁰ AGFMA, *Chronicles of St. Joseph community, Tam Ha, 31 Jan. 1968.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22 Sept. 1968.

Despite the difficult situation they gave priority to the formation of local vocations. They were aware that in preparing the personnel they were laying the foundations for the future development of the Institute in Vietnam. They tried to infuse the Salesian qualities in the aspirants during the period of discernment and of decision-making.

1.2. *Transmission of the Charism*

1.2.1. Spiritual Foundations

The sisters tried, with the help of our Salesian brothers, to lay solid foundations of religious life in the aspirants by caring for their spiritual life: Eucharistic adoration every Sunday, monthly and yearly retreats, weekly catechism lessons, study program for the formation period according to the directives of the Institute, weekly conferences, private talks and readings.¹² The community library had sufficient books on Salesian spirituality in Italian and in Vietnamese, translated by the Salesians who worked in close collaboration.

The sisters took great care to give Mary a prominent place in the formation of the aspirants and young sisters. The chronicles highlight the Marian feasts organized in the community or in the parish church with the various expressions of devotion: novena, catechism, celebrations at the oratory and parish, procession, ritual flower offering, daily sacrifices, letters to Mary and many other ways of showing filial love.¹³

1.2.2 Life in the Aspirantate and Family Spirit

Sr Rosa Zoller, who was an assistant in Hong Kong was a person of rich experience. The house of Tam Ha could hold 96 aspirants, from the 6th grade upward. They were divided into 4 groups; but the girls from the 10th grade up were called older aspirants. In

¹² AGFMA 15(96)08, *Sr Elena Miravalle's letters to Mother General, Tam Ha 24 July 1965.*

¹³ AGFMA, *From the Chronicles of St. Joseph community, Tam Ha 31 May 1964, 13 May 1967.*

group activities, the older aspirants guided the younger ones and were a real help to the sisters.

The sisters took great care to promote the family spirit – a great value in the Vietnamese culture – during the period of formation through friendly, simple and cheerful relationships. The spirit of sacrifice, love and obedience was nurtured through the example of the sisters, who were real models. In fact when their command of the spoken language was limited, it was substituted by a more efficacious language – the language of good example. The chronicles report that the superior's conferences were a program of life for the sisters. They emphasized good example and the study of the language: "Mother Provincial recommended us to speak through good example [...]. She insisted especially on the study of the language, saying that we have to give it the greatest importance and left it to us as one of our main duties."¹⁴

2. The second Period (1975-1990)

2.1. Situation of the Institute after 1975

This was a time of serious challenges and had a direct impact on religious life on account of the socialist regime brought to the South by the Communists in the North. Foreseeing future changes, from the feast of the Sacred Heart of 1975, Sr Anna Persico and Sr Elena Miravalle passed on the leadership of the two communities to the Vietnamese sisters Maddalena Minh Chau (Tam Ha) and Anna Thi (Thanh Da). Sr Maddalena (32 years old) assumed the responsibility of leading the Institute in Vietnam from 1975. On 17 July 1976 Sr Anna Persico and Sr Elena Miravalle were expelled as were all the foreigners from Vietnam. There were 17 Vietnamese sisters who remained. All the religious houses were subjected to search and abrupt closure. There was an atmosphere of terror; no one knew when they might be put in prison or who might accuse them.

¹⁴ AGFMA, *Chronicles of St. John Bosco community, Cho Lon, 18 Jan.1963.*

2.2. *The Challenges*

There were thousands of restrictions and prohibitions enforced by the government, which were a real challenge to the acceptance and formation of candidates. Some of the challenges typical of this period were:

- Political closure: no one was allowed to go out of Vietnam, or to have contacts with people outside the country.
- Economy: people were forbidden to transport foodstuffs outside their own zone; foodstuffs were rationed out on the basis of a ration card.
- Restrictions on religion: gatherings were forbidden, religious activities were limited to the parish church compound and to one hour per week.
- Restrictions on movement: staying in a place was prohibited without registering oneself and without permission for temporary stay.

For a number of years no one dared to accept young girls who were not previously known. Only the girls who were aspirants with us earlier and were ready to pay a heavy price – hard work, hunger, poverty, prison, uncertain future, preparedness to flee any time – requested to join us after 1976. Only three aspirants out of ten were admitted as postulants in 1976. The number increased in the following years.

2.3. *Formation and the Passing on of Charism*

2.3.1 Through Everyday Life

As the school was confiscated the sisters could no longer teach there. They had to look out for other means to sustain themselves. To earn their living the sisters worked on the land. They cultivated rice and vegetables, sold goods, worked in factories and tried many other jobs. They reduced the number of persons in the two houses. Silently and discreetly, they opened a house in Doc Mo, a rural place in 1976. The aspirants lived and worked with the sisters in the two houses of

Tam Ha and Doc Mo. Much family spirit, fraternity and loving kindness reigned among them. Reminiscing this period, the sisters recall the great spirit of sacrifice, love for God and for one another, mutual trust and help, and promptness in obedience that characterized this period. Despite this hard and sacrificing life joy was not lacking even if they had to sleep with a hoe in hand and hold their meetings by the light of a petrol lamp. After a day's hard work the sisters would have a private talk with Jesus, uniting themselves with the spirit of the Founders. During this time the community lived the atmosphere of Mornese.

2.3.2 Formative program for the Aspirants, Postulants, Novices

Since it was not possible any more to send the young girls to Hong Kong or Italy, it was decided in 1977 to open a Novitiate and Sr Maria Nguyeãn thò Dung was appointed novice mistress. Although she had not participated in any course of preparation for this responsibility, Sr Maria carried out this task ably until 1997.

The contents of the formation program of this period were all derived from memory. The sisters-in-charge recalled what they had learned during their own formation and tried to pass it on faithfully to their charges.

Program for Conferences

Material for the spiritual and Salesian formation of the members was scarce, for it was dangerous to keep books in foreign language in the house. Communication with Rome and the Province in Hong Kong took an eternity. The correspondence took four to five months. Newspapers and magazines were undelivered. On account of all this the sisters had only few books at their disposal: *The Imitation of Christ*, *Vade Mecum* of Don Barberis, *The Life of St. Mary D. Mazzarello*, *The Life of St. John Bosco*, *The Bible*, and *The Constitutions*. The Bible and the Constitutions served constantly and efficaciously as meditation books for the novices.

They had regular spiritual exercises and retreats, and were faithful to the practices of piety even when they had to flee.

Practical Lessons and Apostolic Activities

Although the situation was tense, the sisters and the persons in formation were zealous in apostolic work, constant in the Sunday activities. At Christmas and Easter, the oratory was rich in initiatives with games and distribution of prizes, especially to the poor boys.

The sisters were aware of the difficult situation; but still they conducted classes to train catechists because they knew how efficacious their contribution would be in the spread of the Gospel. Even though the formation of these youths encountered many obstacles and interruptions, the work continued under God's Providence. Catechism and other activities prospered and the main energy came from the sisters and the youths in formation. The Salesian spirit and charism were learnt and assimilated at the school of life, through daily formation and shared responsibility with the young collaborators.

In 1978 there were many difficulties in organizing activities as there was the danger of losing the house. In 1980, however, the government withdrew its project, and no one knows the reason why. In 1979 there was the joy of the first profession of the first three sisters formed after the unification of the country. In 1981 six sisters made their perpetual profession after waiting for 11 years, three sisters renewed their vows and three youngsters entered the novitiate. The visit of the Provincial, Sr Franca Dardanella from Hong Kong, after 12 years of separation was a highlight of the year 1987.

From 1990 the political situation was more favourable and relations with other countries became more open. It was possible to follow closely the formative program proposed by the Center; the schedules and curriculum were better organized. Looking back at the journey of growth of the Institute in Vietnam in these 30 years, and particularly recalling the inconsolable cries of the Vietnamese sisters when the missionaries were expelled in 1976 and their preoccupation that the young Institute in Vietnam would not be able to resist the adversities, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians can clearly see God's provident hand upon them. If the Institute in Vietnam

continues to grow vigorously, it owes its vitality to the healthy roots of the Salesian charism implanted in the soil of good vocations. It is not through language or science learnt at school, but through the love and example of the missionaries imbued with the Salesian spirit that the Salesian Charism penetrated and spread in the fertile soil of Vietnam.

Now the Institute in Vietnam has 80 perpetually professed sisters, 55 sisters with temporary vows, 25 novices, 10 postulants, 25 aspirants, approximately 70 pre-aspirants and 6 sisters working in the missions. They are the fruits of a constant and patient process of nurturing the charism.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted that various ways were adopted during the formation process. There were challenges at various times; but they helped in sowing our charism rather than hindering it. What made the charism grow greatly was the ‘Salesian heart’.

Our daily spirituality – serving God with Salesian spirit of joy – can transform our life into a school in which the sisters live and transmit the spirit and the charism to those being formed in a creative, lively way, without being imprisoned by anything whatever. It was our first sisters’ lives and their intentional sowing that strengthened the roots of our charism, from which has burst forth a powerful life.

These thirty years of the Institute in Vietnam were full of events, challenges and explorations. This paper, however, is limited by the lack of documentation; all the same it will hopefully serve as stimulus for further researches in the future so that the aspects presented in this paper can be developed further. Moreover, it would be interesting to study more deeply the Marian dimension in our formation vis-à-vis the rich traditional devotion among the Vietnamese people. There is yet another interesting aspect to be looked into – inculturation and the translation of the love of the Preventive System to the local context. The Vietnamese culture is heavily influenced by Confucianism; for them “to love is to use the rod and to be sweet is to hate”.