

# THE MISSION OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS IN CHINA

*Elena Miravalle FMA\**

Msgr. Luigi Versiglia, in 23 January 1923, embarked from Brindisi accompanying to China the first six Daughters of Mary Help of Christians whom he had requested already for some time. They arrived at Shiu Chow on 15 May 1923.

Sr. PARRI Palmira (Directress)  
Sr. ARMELLINO Domenica  
Sr. BOTTINI Elena  
Sr. PALLAVICINI Marcella  
Sr. TARTAGLIONE Giovanna  
Sr. TESTA Giuseppina

## 1. Paternal Cares

Msgr. Versiglia was prodigious in counsel and assistance to the newly arrived, so that they could assimilate the usages and customs of a culture so diverse from theirs, but above all so that they could be at the level of inserting themselves in the work of evangelization among the simple souls and open to grace. For this, he took personal care of the formation of the Sisters. Five days after their arrival, Monsignor gave the Sisters a conference:

1) Because here your Mothers and Superior are far and their word and counsel cannot reach you but rarely through letters, it is necessary that you are solid, strong, exemplary, exact with mathematical precision in the observance of your Rule. Think that you are the first Sisters in China and that you give imprint to the Mission.

2) Remember that Jesus died on the cross for the salvation of souls. Souls are not saved without suffering. We must make it as ours, that which are lacking in the Passion of Our Lord, in the sense that uniting our small

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privations and sufferings to his, we apply them for the salvation of souls. Don Bosco promised an efficacious mission in China, in as much as the members of our Society correspond to grace and to vocation.

3) I would like that you are not pessimists but optimists. Meaning: when something is lacking, you do not know what to do, see uncertainty in the future, do not be lost in vain fears. Always believe in Divine Providence. Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco are with you. Do not be afraid; on the contrary, always go ahead with holy enthusiasm. Optimism and trust in God.

4) Still one last thing: wish each other well! Among yourselves and with the Directress. Consider her as a mother; obey her; respect her; listen to her. She must also scold you sometimes, but it will be for your good. She must do it. Help her and do not leave her the task of correcting you always. Do it among yourselves, and remember that where more persons are gathered in charity, there Jesus reigns. All that favors charity brings near to God. On the contrary, all that harms charity draws Him away. Desire above all your sanctification, and then you will also procure that of many others. Fraternal charity.

Msgr. Versiglia was forming a group of young catechists to send to the various mission districts, to help the missionaries, for the religious instruction of the women and of children. Upon their arrival, the Sisters found in the mission of 7 Kuneong. They helped each other, specially for the necessary relations with the externs, for the catechumenate and for the oratory.

## 2. First Priority

*The study of the language:* in order to speak with the young that they had in the house, to fulfil their educative mission and to communicate with the people.

“21 March 1923 - We begin the lessons of the Chinese language with Tong Sin San, repeating sounds and gracious monosyllables, almost always without understanding nothing...”.

The missionaries were committed in the study, but that monotonous repetition of sounds sometimes became heavy, so that the Sisters were distracted.... Sr. Elena Bottini, a good teacher of design, sketched the old teacher at the margin of the notebook; another was letting the pieces of bread or the grains of rice fall on the ground, happy to see the birds rushed

to her feet to peck on them; another counted the hair of the beard of the teacher... These were inconveniences which could not be tolerated during the lesson. With severe tone, Tong Sin San called the attention invariably of Sr. Domenica Armellino, who had the defect of being the youngest. Sr. Domenica complained about this to Msgr. Versiglia who answered her: "You do not know that the Chinese cannot get angry with the old and thus the fault is always on the young?" Sr. Domenica understood the lesson of inculturation and accepted in peace the scolding in the name of the group.

After eight months of study, the six pioneers placed themselves in the apostolate. Following the Salesians and the Kuneong, through fields and gardens, they arrived in a poor house where several families of catechumens were gathered. The missionaries taught the men, the Sisters and the Kuneong, the women and the children, teaching the sign of the cross, the prayers, and the first answers of the catechism. For about two years, this good people asked for Baptism and finally on Christmas, the missionaries offered to their bishop 104 baptisms.

### **3. Works and Expansion**

1923 - HO SAI

At Ho Sai, the works were:

- Studentate for the native young: work, music, song, sewing, embroidery, cooking.
- Orphanage for healthy babies abandoned or belonging to very poor families.
- Shelter for the blind and for old women.
- Holy Infancy, the work which has given many troubles. It consisted of sick children, abandoned.
- School with the first elementary classes for interns and externs.
- Festive oratory.
- Knitwear with works of commission to obtain economic help.
- Catechism for Christians and catechumens; visit to families.
- Linen room for the Salesians.
- The care of the laundry for the churches of the district.

The works opened, according to the needs of the place and the circumstances.

The “Shelter” for the blind and the old women, and the “Holy Infancy” for abandoned children were born in this manner: one day, a teacher brought to the Sisters of Ho Sai a three-year old girl, who became blind because of sickness. She was the first blind of the “Shelter”. A little later, a girl of 13 was taken from the street, abandoned, almost dying under a plant. On another day, a woman accompanied a young sick bride to the Sisters. During the feast of the Directress, an orphan and blind boy of four years was brought. The teacher, who brought the first blind baby, arrived one day with a two-month old baby who was very sick. The little child had hardly the time to receive baptism and flew to paradise.

#### 1924 - SHIU CHOW

At Shiu Chow, the works were:

- Mary Help of Christians College with classes for teachers, which prepared teachers and gave regular diplomas (The college was bombarded in 1940).
- Clinic which gave assistance to the poor.
- Festive oratory.

With the beginning of the scholastic year 1924-1925, Sr. Elena Bottini was transferred to the College of Shiu Chow from Ho Sai. The house hosted three interns. There, Sr. Elena taught English and design. Several months earlier, the good Miss Mary Hanghton left for Hong Kong, “after having been an interpreter for a year, rendering a most useful service”.

The apostolic work brought joy and satisfaction to the missionaries. But the economic resources did not go at the same pace. To trust Providence was sign of faith; but it was also wise that they did something to obtain funds. The Sisters asked a Sister who knew how to knit. And so they procured wool and machine. The interns who were big enough, the old ones with a good vision, sewed the shirts which the good Sr. Giuseppina Mattioli ably produced.

Another source of income, which today would be considered as exploitation of minors, was the production of matches, which the nearby factories gave to houses. The children, with their small hands, placed the head of sulfur. For the children, it was as if they were playing. The remuneration was minimal. It was like a drop in the ocean; but it was very useful.

### 1933 - LOK CHONG

Three Sisters worked on the following:

- Kindergarten, the only one in the area, very frequented, but often disturbed by the guerrillas.
- Catechesis, catechumenate.
- Clinic.
- Care of the church and its linen.

The mission was poor. Electricity did not exist. For the water for the kitchen and for every need, there was the need to go to the river to fetch water. Sometimes, there was no mass, because the Salesians visited the villages. Because the zone was rural, for several times, the house served as rest house for the missionaries who were tired and sick.

The kindergarten of the Sisters was the only one in the village. It was filled to capacity quickly. Sr. Fusina was one who was cheerful and smiling, and who easily made friends with everyone. The mothers would bring new babies, but the Sisters were forced to refuse them for lack of space. "You see - they told the mothers - there are no more benches". And these answered back: "I buy a chair, but you accept my baby!".

At Lok Chong, at that time, there were no doctors nor pharmacist. When Fr. Bartolomeo Fochesato went to the Rector, a good doctor as he was, he immediately opened a clinic. Sr. Agnese Fusina, a courageous nurse, was of great help. One day, they brought to the mission an injured man with a dislocated leg. He was suffering terribly. Fr. Fochesato and Sr. Agnese made a big sign of the cross, and then with determination, put the bone at the right place. After a few days, he was able to return to his house, thanking the Madonna who had cured him.

Another day, they brought to the mission a woman with an arm crushed and already gangrene. To save her life, it was necessary to amputate the arm. Having given the injection, Fr. Fosechato, with a saw, cut the arm, held steadily by Sr. Fusina. The woman was cured. She and the husband asked for religious instruction. They were baptized and they lived as good Christians, very much devoted to the Madonna who had helped them.

### 1934 – SHANGHAI

The beginning at Shanghai was modest, and the development difficult on account of the war. But later, the work became consolidated, above all with the school.

- Nursery for abandoned infants - the service did not last long because of the difficulty with the Buddhist administration.
- Nursery school, elementary and high schools, humble beginnings but later great development.
- Service at the Hospital "Immaculate Heart of Mary", bombarded in 1937.
- Sisters as nurses in the military hospitals during the war.
- Boarding house for young workers, to protect them and to give them an environment of family.
- Evening school for young workers, about a hundred students.
- Boarding school for children who were orphans. Everyone was frequenting the school of the Sisters.
- Parish works very flourishing.
- FMA Pre-novitiate and Novitiate (closed at Ho Sai).

#### 4. Challenges

*Health* - In 1928, after a little less than five years since the presence in China, there had been the first repatriation of three Sisters:

Two of the first expedition and

One of the second expedition (1926).

In 1926, three new missionaries arrived from Italy: Sr. Maria Menegotto, Sr. Antonietta Quaglino and Sr. Orsolina Serra. The acclimatization was very difficult for Sr. Maria Menegotto. After two years, she returned to Italy together with Sr. Marcella Pallavicini and Sr. Giovanna Tartaglione, as advised to them by the doctor.

In 1933, ten years since the foundation, another two returned to Italy. Which were the causes of the repatriation? Tuberculosis - malaria and its consequences - incurable allergies.

From 1923 to 1954, year of the departure of the last Sisters, the situation of the FMA in China:

53 FMA of which 34 missionaries

17 missionaries who returned to their home country

4 missionaries transferred to other provinces

4 deceased (2 Chinese and 2 missionaries).

*War* - Aside from the difficulty of the language, the inconveniences of poverty and the sacrifices of the apostolate, there was another factor which rendered life difficult, not only to the missionaries: the guerrilla.

Msgr. Versiglia asked each of the Sisters in private if she preferred to go elsewhere; he feared that the FMA might suffer fear and abuse. All answered that they preferred to remain in their mission, where obedience had placed them. The heart of the good Father remained consoled.

1930 was the year of sorrow for the martyrdom of Msgr. Luigi Versiglia and the young confrere Fr. Callisto Caravario.

- In Shanghai, the hospital of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (1937) was bombarded.
- The college of Mary Help of Christians in Shiu Chow was bombarded (1940).
- The bombardments forced the flight of families, with the consequent closures of the schools.
- The Sisters were forced to leave the works, because of the continuous inspection by the government, the persecutions, the escapes.

At Ho Sai in 1932, there were two attempts on the part of soldiers to take over the house. Once, they came in the night, after prayers. The Salesian Fr. Ricaldone, called urgently, put them to flight. A second time, they entered the house of the Kuneong. But without knowing how, or better, after fervent prayers to the Madonna, they left before dark.

Towards the end of 1937, the bombardments of Shanghai ceased. The Japanese troops had entered victoriously. The new masters allowed the foreigners to return to their residences. For the Chinese, instead, there was the need of special permission from the Military Command. There was the permission to return to the old residences; but the residences did not exist anymore! Chapei was practically razed to the ground. Yangtzepoo was partially destroyed. The Hospital Immaculate Heart of Mary, was hit by the bombs and seriously damaged, and therefore was non-functional. Everything had to start from the beginning!

1937-1938 - At Lok Chong, even if it was an agricultural zone, the people fled for fear of the bombardments. The schools were empty. Without the school fees, without the tutorial lessons: how could the Sisters live? They cultivated vegetables, raised chicken and rabbits. They sewed childrens' clothes. A Christian lady who lived with the Sisters, helped sell and bring income to the house. In this manner, Providence was not lacking!

On 12 December 1941, the Sisters of Ho Sai received the order not to go out of their house. They were already surrounded by soldiers in

disguise. By order of Msgr. Canazei, the Sisters hand over the direction of the works to the Superior of the “Announcers of the Lord” Sr. Monica, in collaboration with Sr. Maddalena Tch’an and Sr. Teresa Tch’an. For this, the Sisters who were foreigners did not appear in front of the authority.

1945-1946 - In Shanghai, the American soldiers, in order to free the port from garbage, unloaded in the playground of the Sisters great quantity of commodities, the most varied, and in bulk. There was everything: wood, paper, glasses, rags, boxes, all commerciable and recyclable materials which the industrious Shanghaiese knew how to utilize, after having acquired them for a considerable price. The Sisters armed themselves with courage and good will: they separated, divided, broke, sawed, piled up, cut and then sold all these goods which they considered to be from God. Thus, with the garbage brought by the Americans, they constructed four classrooms for the high school, which immediately was populated, and a pavilion for the orphans. However, the orphans were so many, that the American soldiers brought a large shed good for 22.

## 5. FMA deaths

*Sr. Tch’an Maria*: born in Ho Sai on 06-06-1907 / died in Shanghai on 23-05-1940.

In presenting her to the Sisters, Msgr. Versiglia said: “May they look at this urchin and may they take care of her. If they cultivate her well, they will make her a saint; otherwise she will come out reckless”.

One of the first four FMAs. Lively, cheerful, a little overbearing, she entered when was already a teacher, graduated at the College of Mary Help of Christians. She got sick of tuberculosis, at 33 years of age.

*Sr. Tong Rosa*: born in Lok Chong in 09-1913 / died in Shanghai on 07-01-1944.

Simple, timid, of few words. She was assistant of the interns who called her “the good Sister”. She never raised her voice; but she made people obey her. She got sick of glandular tuberculosis. The surgical intervention did not give hope to the result. She died in Shanghai at 31 years of age.

*Sr. Maria Russo*: born in Catania on 06-05-1904 / died in Ho sai in 20-09-1944.

Directress of the house of Shiu Chow. Died of heart trouble, because of the frights she underwent during the bombardments, the persecutions



and rough manners of the soldiers. Msgr. Canazei wrote Mother Elena Bottini: “She was a holy religious, and the Lord gave her the occasion of obtaining many merits, specially in her sufferings during her last hours”.

*Sr. Giovanna Rossi*: born in Milano on 01-02-1888 / died in Ho Sai on 03-09-1945.

Directress of the house of Ho Sai. She had high fevers because of malaria; cured but did not recover; on the contrary, she succumbed to complications which brought her to the tomb.

*Sr. Wong Caterina*: born in Tsingtien on 09-08-1924 / died in Shanghai on 10-01-1965.

After the departure of the missionaries, she was interned with the other Sisters of Shanghai. Probably the communists had their plans for her. She was a leader. She had an uncommon capacity. She was forced to follow courses of indoctrination day and night. But because she did not give in, she was enclosed in a room and never went out from there. The day and the circumstances of her death were not known.

## **6. FMA vocations**

At Ho Sai, the first four aspirants were received: the Sisters Maria and Maddalena Tch'an, Teresa Tch'an, and Agnese Wong of Lok Chong (these last two did not wish to continue the postulancy in the Congregation of Msgr. Canazei). The four young shared with the Sisters the common life. On 31 January 1935, they received the medal as postulants and on 31 January 1938, they made their first profession.

For reasons of discretion, the Novitiate of Ho Sai was closed, so as not to create inconveniences to the “Announcers of the Lord”. The postulants were sent to Shanghai where on 22 March 1939, the Congregation for Religious have canonically erected the FMA novitiate at Yangtzepoo, after having declared as close the novitiate of Ho Sai. The novice mistress was Sr. Orsolina Serra.

## **7. Vocation SAL (Sisters Announcers of the Lord)**

On 1 March 1933, Msgr. Canazei imposed the crucifix on the first six postulants of the native Congregation “Announcers of the Lord”. The young postulants were: Kung Clara, Lieu Lucia, Chin Teresa, Wong

Agnese and the two Sisters Chiu Maria and Francesca. Monsignor entrusted them to the Directress Sr. Parri. They had as assistant Sr. Domenica Armellino, who transferred to their house, to introduce them to a life in community. Of these, only three arrived at the profession which came on 12 December 1938. In 1940, six professed and seven entered the novitiate. They had as guide a Sister from Canton.

## **8. Past Pupils**

At Shiu Chow, but specially at Shanghai, the past pupils gathered.

This relationship of the young and with their educators was significant. They would be the ones to make known the religion when the Sisters will be impeded to preach.

## **9. Exodus**

At the end of 1945, it was necessary to protect the two German Sisters Sr. Peter Elisabetta and Sr. Zöller Rosa. The house of Macau was started.

The Sisters had diverse offices before dedicating themselves to education and scholastic instruction:

- Kitchen and linen room of the personnel and students of the Salesian Institute (for a few years).
- School for poor children (for some years in the house).
- Help to the Salesian Press - Bindery - Sale of books and religious objects.
- Nursery school and first elementary classes (Yuet Wah-Pedro Lobo).

Hong Kong - In 1950, Mother Elena Bottini left Shanghai and went to Hong Kong in search of a residence and work for the Sisters. She found a house for rent in Kowloon, Diamond Hill and successively, at Wong Tai Sin.

All the Sister missionaries reached Hong Kong; but not all the Chinese Sisters could leave China. Five of them remained. At Ho Sai, Sr. Maddalena Tch'an was brought into prison, because she was in contact with foreigners and because she was from a land-owning family.

At Shanghai, all the Sisters were interred in the convent of the Sisters “Helpers of the Holy Souls”, with courses of indoctrination. Thus, they were compelled to forced labor with the intent to break their will and to compel them to sign the “Three Freedoms”. Sr. Caterina Wong died in this house.

## **10. Province**

On 4 May 1938, Mother Elena Bottini was named Visitatrice. The Superiors separated the houses of China and Japan from the Indian Province of St. Thomas the Apostle, entrusting them to Mother Elena Bottini, resident in Shanghai. They assigned to her as her direct collaborators: Sr. Antonietta Quaglino, first counsellor resident at Lok chong; Sr. Letizia Begliatt, second counsellor resident at Beppu, Japan; Sr. Jolanda Benazzato, secretary and economer resident at Ho Sai. Mother Elena remarked: “Here, indeed, there is the need for faith! To put as Visitatrice one who lives in a rented house, with collaborators so far, with difficulties of communication which no superior of Italy can imagine...”. However, Mother Elena had the sufficient faith.

On 16 May 1946, the Superiors separated the houses of Japan and erected the houses of China as a Province, and Mother Elena Bottini was named Provincial.