

THE IDENTITY OF THE SISTERS SERVANTS OF THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY IN THAILAND

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The universal call of the people of God to holiness is carried out in a special way by the members of the Congregation of Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (SIHM). The sign of God's merciful love towards the Institute is clearly manifested in the history especially at the time of birth in the Church, through its founder and its history. When we go through the history we can understand that the foundation of the Congregation was the providential and particular gift of God to the Church.

1. Founder

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:1-2).

Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti¹ was an Italian Salesian. Born from a poor family in Pinarolo Po (Pavia) in Italy on 5 February 1890. He entered the oratory in Turin in October 1900 and completed his course in the grammar school. He went to novitiate at the Foglizzo receiving the religious habit from the hands of Fr. Michael Rua in 1905. He professed at Foglizzo on 15 February 1906. He had to interrupt his Theological studies, since he was called to join the military during the World War I. He was ordained a priest in the war zone at Udine on 18 March 1916.² In 1918, he was discharged from the zone of war and he was asked to go to China as a missionary. Under the guidance of Fr. Versiglia, he left for the missions in China where he worked for nine years.³

In the beginning he did his apostolate in an institute in Macao and later in the Vicariate Apostolic of Shiu Chow in the district of Leinchow

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¹ Cf M. AGOSTINO – P. EGAN and Others, *The Salesian Family of Don Bosco*. Roma, Istituto Salesiano Pio XI 1999, p. 125.

² Cf G. FAVINI, *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*. Torino, Scuola Grafica Salesiana 1969, pp. 213-214.

³ Cf M. AGOSTINO – P. EGAN and Others, *The Salesian Family of Don Bosco...*, p. 125.

(1924-1926). In 1926, he was appointed as a novice master (1926-1928). On 26 November 1927 he left once again, as a leader of a Salesian expedition to Thailand, at that time called Siam.⁴

After having arrived in Thailand, he put his heart and soul for the organization and development of religious life in the different parts in Thailand. In a short time with many sacrifices he was able to establish many Christian centres and the Salesian works. After having canonically established the mission, he was appointed as the mission superior on 30 June 1930.⁵ In this year he opened a minor seminary to train local clergy.⁶

On 28 May 1934 he was appointed as the first Apostolic Prefect of Ratchburi and was consecrated Bishop on 24 June 1941. His episcopal consecration took place during the war. During the period when Thailand was affected by war, his anxiety and responsibility increased so much so he had to represent the Holy See in the whole country of Thailand. Like all the Salesian confreres Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti had to suffer inconveniences, privations, exhaustions, and extraordinary sacrifices. But because of his temperament and faith he was able to overcome all the difficulties especially by preparing the native clergy, establishing schools and social work centres. The vocations started to grow among the fervent Christians. And Msgr. Pasotti had the joy of leading personally the first priests of the Vicariate who were destined for studying in the different Pontifical Universities of Rome and in Salesian Athenaeum. In a few years, he was able to establish 10 houses: house of students, novitiate, schools and boarding schools, etc. With the establishment of various social work centres, the Salesians earned the affection of the people and the esteem of the government. Among all these works there was the establishment of institution for the formation of teachers and catechists, and an orphanage at Bang Nok Khueak was inaugurated and blessed in February 1948.

Catholic action i.e., the involvement of Catholics in the parish and the establishment of a seminary were very close to his heart. When he came to Thailand there was not much of Catholic action in the missions. Immediately after his coming he organized the catholic action with good guidelines. He had the plan to build a big seminary but he was called to his eternal reward. He died at Bangkok in Thailand on 3 September 1950. He died because of Malaria and blood cancer. His death left the vacuum among the clergy and the faithful of the Vicariate.

⁴ Cf G. FAVINI, *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani...*, pp. 213-214.

⁵ Cf *ibid.*

⁶ Cf M. AGOSTINO – P. EGAN and Others, *The Salesian Family of Don Bosco...*, p. 125.

2. Foundation

The Congregation of the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a diocesan Congregation, was officially established by Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti on 7 December 1937. On the following day, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the first group of seven young women began their novitiate at Bang Nok Khueak, which is the native place of the Congregation and beside the Salesian Theologate.

On the feast of the Immaculate Conception in the following year (8 December 1938), six novices made their first profession. The founder himself explained why the feast of the Immaculate Conception had been chosen for the establishment of the new Institute: “When I founded the Congregation, I offered it to Our Lady. I chose her as patron to show that the congregation is hers...”⁷

The first name given to the new religious Institute in Thai is “SONG KHRO” which means, “Sisters-Helpers”. The mission of the Congregation would be to help in the missionary field, in the works of evangelization, education, works of mercy and others.⁸

Along the course of the time (1937-1971) we felt the need to change the name of the Congregation; the first name of the Congregation was “Sisters-Helpers” and the current Thai word broadly meant ‘social action’. We thought it would be more consistent and ideal for the Congregation to adapt the new name, “Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary” (SIHM). This change of name however, didn’t change the spirit and identity of it.

Many Salesians (SDB) and Sisters of ‘Daughters of Mary Help of Christians’ (FMA) contributed to the birth of this Congregation. At the death of the founder, the Congregation was only thirteen years old. After the death of Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti in 1950, his successor Msgr. Peter Caretto SDB took over the responsibility of the young Congregation. He guided the Institute, so as to contribute to the cultural development in the country.

The founder was deeply devoted to Don Bosco and to the Church, as were the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from the time of our foundation. The first superior of the Congregation and the first mistress

⁷ G. PASOTTI, *Teaching for Sisters Servants* (SongKhro). (The small collection and translation in English), Bang Nok Khuek, 22 August 1942.

⁸ Cf G. PASOTTI, *The Path of Life: first edition of the society of Sisters Helpers*. (The original text is in Thai and translation in English). Bang Nok Khueak 1937, No. 2.

of novices were FMA Sisters. In 1964, the Congregation became autonomous, with the first Thai superior elected at the first general chapter. The presence of Salesians and FMAs explains the deep Salesian roots of the ‘Sisters Servants’.

3. Charism and mission of SIHM

The Church wants that the religious families should have a clear idea of their particular physiognomy and their own mission: each one of them has been called to manifest some aspect of the richness of the One Mystery of Christ the Saviour and to cooperate in some way in the one salvific mission of Christ which the Church continues to realize.⁹ The charism which is the gift of God that lies at the origin of the institute and of the vocation of everyone is the central point of orientation and measure of fidelity to the plan of God, to incarnate a particular aspect of the countenance of Christ.

The original grace of the founders put in evidence that our institute was born to respond to the needs of the local Church, and is totally and exclusively dedicated to the service of the local Church and the missionary activity. All the members dedicate their life to it through the witness of life, proclamation of the Word and charitable services in order to make the Church fully present to the whole world and that all may share fully in the service of Christ.¹⁰

For the approval to establish the Congregation, Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti, sent to the ‘Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith’, ‘The Path of Life’ the first edition of the rules/guidelines of the society of ‘Sisters Helpers’. In art. 1 of the path of life, he wrote; “The society of Sisters of Helpers of Ratchburi Diocese is a native society who makes simple vows, with a strong missionary spirit, making oneself a Siamese for the Siamese.”¹¹

The charism of the Congregation is the heart of every Sisters Servants. The art. 4 of the Constitutions speaks of the charism of the Congregation, that is:

⁹ *Lumen Gentium*. No. 46.

¹⁰ *Ad Gentes*. No. 5.

¹¹ G. PASOTTI, *The Path of Life: first edition of the society of Sisters Helpers...*, No. 1.

“The charism of the Society is love, service and forgiveness, ready always to answer “ I am the servant of the Lord” just like the Mother of God, by giving oneself wholeheartedly to serve God in man, ready to do anything which God desires, with sacrifice, even in very difficult circumstances because of love for Christ, following the slogan of the Society “the love of Christ impels us”.¹²

Love Jesus, serve Jesus and Mary, give forgiveness of the same Jesus on the cross to the people in need.

The original charism of the Congregation has always been to help mission centers, prepare and teach catechism with great interest, the proclamation of the gospels where it was needed, educating the young girls and women, and leading the Catholic group activities in the various Churches.¹³ We notice that the Congregation has originated in a country, which is in need of evangelization. For the spiritual development of the people, the Congregation adapts the culture of the people. Through teaching in the schools at different levels, with the method of loving kindness and by serving people of other religions, we impart fundamental values of Christ in the way of Don Bosco.¹⁴

The mission of the Congregation is to help the local Church, with the young people and for the young people with the varied forms of apostolate and evangelization. Inserted in the local Church and devoted to the service of people through the apostolate, we help them to love God and experience His love in a visible manner.

3.1 Service and bonds with the local Church

In the service of the local Church, the pastoral appointments suggested by the founder and encouraged by the Bishop of the diocese remain of importance. The work of evangelization and catechesis continue to remain priority for the Sisters.

The relationship with the local Church as in the article 2 of the Constitutions is:

¹² CONGREGATION OF SISTERS SERVANTS OF THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY, *Constitutions of the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*. (The original text is in Thai and translation in English), Suratthani 1985, No. 4. Here after the Constitutions articles will be referred to as, Constitutions.

¹³ Cf E. VIGANÒ, “*Letter of Recognition*”, in *The Salesian Family of Don Bosco*. Roma, Istituto Salesiano Pio XI 1999, p. 129.

¹⁴ Cf *Constitutions*, No. 47.

“The Congregation of the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is an apostolic religious society approved by the Church under the Bishop ordinary of the Diocese where the mother house is established”.¹⁵

This means the Congregation has particular bonds with the local Church: being in the local Church in collaboration with the Bishop to develop work of apostolate. In the article 44 of the Constitutions it underlines with clarity such bond:

“By the workings of the Holy Spirit, the Society was born in the Church for her good. Thus, cooperation in the various activities of the parish and the Diocese is actually doing the work in the name of the Church”.¹⁶

Accordingly, the Congregation is under the rules of the diocese and is under the responsibility of the Bishop of the place, where the mother house is established. The principle goal of the Congregation is to serve the local Church.¹⁷ The mission also expresses the privileged state of close bonds concretely with the local Church. The realization of the mission is:

“to answer the needs of the local Church. Therefore, Sisters will cooperate in the different activities of the parish and the Diocese specially in lending a hand to the parish in house work, pastoral work, educational formation in the school and works of mercy, giving special attention to the needy in body and spirit”.¹⁸

We express our bond with the local Church in our careful and docile manner in listening to the magisterium of the Bishop in the early of the foundation, the passage to the novitiate, the first profession and the perpetual profession are privileged occasions, where the Bishop offers to teach magisterium of formation for the religious life. He visits at particular circumstances of formative and true opportunities to consolidate the bonds with the local Church.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 44.

¹⁷ Cf *ibid.*, No. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 3.

3.2 Bonds with the young people and with the people

In the apostolate, a strong attention of the Sisters Servants has turned to the young people and the people. Being a Congregation to “be in the Church and for her good”,¹⁹ the cooperation with the Dioceses and the Parishes is a fundamental element of the apostolate. The Sisters Servants require to devote generously to the urgencies of the people to announce the Good News of Christ.

The bonds with the people have to be expressed and lived mainly through the apostolate of catechesis. “The teaching of catechism is the formation of Christians because it is the planting of faith in the heart”.²⁰ The education of the youth is considered as an important sector of the apostolate of the Congregation. It is worth to bring the whole article 47 to affirm the intention:

“The formation of youth is one of the apostolic works of the Society. Thus, the Sisters will create a family atmosphere together with the children, with a supernatural love (...) the Sisters will apply the method of Don Bosco which is based on loving-kindness, reason and the practice of religion, which will make the service of looking after the children and the youth, specially the poor ones, pleasant, prudent, joyful and responsible, seeing these youth as children of God”.²¹

3.3 Varied forms of apostolate and evangelization

We get inserted fully into the local Church and involve in many forms of apostolate. From the catechesis up to contributing vocational growth in the schools have an important role to play and the Constitutions underline this element:

“The school is one of the important institutes of learning which helps the youth to develop themselves to be adults in society and in the Church. The Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary consider education as an activity which can truly evangelize”.²²

As initiated in educational work the relationship with the students of the school is maintained long even if they leave the school.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, No. 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, No. 47.

²² *Ibid.*, No. 49.

“In order that the fruits of education which started in the school continue in life, the Sisters will take care of the past pupils by following them up with love and care, give advice and continuous help. As for the Catholic past pupils, the Sisters will encourage them to take part in the activities of the Church, be truly responsible of their Christian duties, and bring Christ to their houses, the school, the society and their daily lives, after the spirit of Don Bosco. Aside from this, they will establish the Salesian Cooperators wherever possible”.²³

The Sisters are called not only for the above mentioned apostolate but also wherever the service and help is needed:

“Therefore, the Sisters are glad to accept all works in order to serve all men after the example of Christ, even if it is looking after the sick, the aged, giving welfare to the poor, and the development of the marginalized so that they may have a better life according to the desire of the founder”.²⁴

4. Identity of SIHM

The Sisters Servants are religious persons dedicated to the service of the local Churches. We are inserted in parishes and dioceses in a missionary spirit, animating groups which operate within the ecclesiastical structures. We live the *Fiat* of Mary, always ready to do the will of God. We are ready to forgive, in accordance with the word and example of Jesus. Love fills all our activities. Like the founder, we strive to be all things for all people. We live and work in a family spirit, with simplicity, joy, optimism, and with the ability to adapt ourselves to all situations.²⁵

4.1 Mary, model of charity for the Sisters Servants

Mary is the model of reference of the spirituality of the institute. The main characteristic of Mary is charity. This virtue contains the whole activity of the Sisters Servants. We do everything to everybody, as the founder has lived and exhorted us to do so. We live and work in the family spirit with simplicity, joy, optimism and ability of adaptation.

The motto of the Congregation is contained in the words of St. Paul “The love of Christ rules us” (2 Cor.5,14). The spirit of our Congregation is defined by few words “to Love, to serve and to forgive”.

²³ *Ibid.*, No. 50.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 46.

²⁵ Cf *ibid.*, No. 11.

It is to Mary that the Sisters Servants raise their eyes as their model. We take Mary as the model of humility and obedience, docile to the voice of the Spirit, to realize His will in the words and in the works, which are conforming, to the divine wish. We insert ourselves in the cultural and social contexts alert to the needs of our brothers and Sisters. The Sisters Servants answer with promptness to every necessity of the situation like Mary's response to God: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (Lc 1,38). The Sisters Servants are ever ready to and available to read the signs of the times in the light of the Word of God; they strengthen their commitment to fulfil the wish of God for the good of their brothers and Sisters; they are ready to push themselves to embrace any sacrifices. In every activity and pastoral service, "the love of Christ rules us"(2 Cor. 5,14) and is translated in daily gestures of availability and brotherly/sisterly service.

The apostolic commitment is noticed in the daily service following the model and example of Mary.

"The Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary will imitate the attitude of acceptance of the will of God in obedience every time they receive whatever responsibility from the superior with the spirit of "fiat" like the Blessed Mother".²⁶

4.2 Spirit of Don Bosco

Another essential element, which characterizes the institute, is the contribution to the development of the culture of the people. It is effected in providing educational opportunities through the teaching in the schools at different levels, practising the method of the loving kindness and serving each other with reason and religion which are the fundamental values in the pedagogy of Don Bosco. The Sisters Servants have been called to live the Salesian spirituality, in our educational mission. Speaking of the style of life, in fact, the Constitutions affirm:

"Aware of the relationship with the Salesian Society, every member will try to uphold the charism of Don Bosco as the driving force in her consecrated life, her apostolate, her community life, her relationship with others. She will try to protect and develop this charism together with the other members of the Salesian Family just like this is a very special spiritual treasure".²⁷

²⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 9.

5. Spirituality of SIHM

The spirituality of the SIHM is based on her constant docility to the Holy Spirit sustained by the strength that comes from the Eucharist and trust in the Blessed Virgin Mary.²⁸

Our spirituality is expressed first of all by a life of complete docility to the Spirit. It commits us to be moulded from within by the Spirit, so that we may become ever more like Christ. It is not possible to bear witness to Christ without reflecting his image, which is made alive in us by grace and the power of the Spirit. This docility then commits us to receive gifts of fortitude and discernment, which are essential elements of missionary spirituality.²⁹

The Holy Spirit is the first guide and interior teacher who transforms each one from within, making her like Christ, so that we may carry on His mission in the world. It is the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization who guides her through the prompting of words which by herself she would not be able to utter, and prepares the hearts of the listeners to welcome the Good News that is proclaimed.

5.1 *The apostolic dimension - spirituality of the institute*

Today, the human sciences underline the importance of open relationships. This not to be understood as in the level of I-you, but also with the reference to the third person, the other in the society. The communities of our Sisters Servants and our apostolic life is characterized by the interpersonal and intra-personal relationships, marked by the family spirit according to the spirit of Don Bosco. The Constitutions put in evidence in this regard that:

“Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary have accepted the vocation to work together with Don Bosco by using his method and charism which the Society has received through the members of the Salesian Society and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who together established and planted the roots of the Society in order that his special gift will bear more fruits among the people of God”.³⁰

²⁸ Cf *ibid.*, No. 11.

²⁹ Cf *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 87.

³⁰ *Constitutions*, No. 8.

It is nevertheless the article 11 of the Constitutions that it expresses with transparency the characteristic life and the task in the Congregation: “In the service of the local Church, which is the specific role of the society, the members will make the charism of Don Bosco appear in their apostolic religious life by their simple and moderate way of living”.³¹

Endowed with faith, humility and love, the Sisters Servants will work for the service of brothers/sisters in the field entrusted, with spirit of sacrifice, diligence, without preference of job and with creativeness. The Sisters Servants will live in the spirit of family together. Their contact with the other is characterized with good manners, joy, tenderness, optimism, flexibility and promptness to forgive according to the teaching and the example of Jesus.³²

Speaking of the family spirit, the Constitutions exhort us that:

“The family spirit that Don Bosco established as the foundation of real fraternal love is expressed in mutual acceptance and respect, in sharing everything whether properties, works, experience, sorrows and joys, daily life together like the practices of piety, meals, recreation and in being mutually responsible for the various projects of the community”.³³

The charity according to the spirit of the institute must include the evangelical spirit that is specified in details in the article 54 of the Constitutions. The interpersonal relationships in the community and in the various apostolate, must be accompanied by the evangelical values. Then it is obvious that, having good interpersonal relationships, the Sisters Servants are exhorted to live a solid life of prayer. The spirituality and the interpersonal relationships don't walk separately in each one's life but if tuned well, they enrich each other reciprocally. To weave relationships, fed by a solid spirituality, it is the commitment that every Sisters Servants assumes with clear awareness. This is a finish ever reached, but always-open verse to ulterior improvements, that are effected in the community and apostolic life of every day.

³¹ *Ibid.*, No. 11.

³² *Cf ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, No. 53.

5.2 Interior Dimension – Christological

It is to Jesus, the teacher of prayer, that the Sisters Servants turn for strength and inspiration. Jesus shows us the principal novel model to be followed in prayer. We need to follow Him in our daily lives.

“Each Sister has a need to meet God in the deep recesses of her life. Thus, she will look for an occasion to converse often with Him personally in peaceful silence, to listen to His words in her heart, and to show her love, express her resolve, ask for strength and to examine her own life situation. This will enable the Sister to know Christ and to build deep friendship with Him which will strengthen her to be faithful to her consecration. In order to build this closeness with God, the Sister will meditate daily, which is focusing on the Lord by bringing in His Word spoken through the Scriptures and in the events of daily life, and meditate in her heart. In this way, she will discover the salvific plan of God in history and recognize His presence in the daily events. For this reason, she can be a witness to the announcement of the good news of love, justice and peace to mankind”.³⁴

With all the help provided by the Institute, the Sisters Servants are to follow Jesus who had incarnated into the situations of people. He is the best model, in establishing relationships with people and with God, whose will, He has fulfilled. He is our strength and we receive this from the daily Eucharistic celebration. The Constitutions article 65 presents to us this element:

“Since the Eucharist is the center of Christian life, the Sisters will participate daily in the offering of the Holy Mass and receive Communion often, practice the teaching of Don Bosco which advises to make a personal visit to the Blessed Sacrament often in order to show love, gratitude, and increase closeness with Jesus, drawing strength for one’s life and apostolate”.³⁵

Conclusion

We have already seen the important elements of the Congregation. The beginnings of our Institute, the persons with vision who are responsible to change the way of life of many, especially, the founder Msgr. Gaetano

³⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 65.

Pasotti, the mission entrusted to the followers and the various ways through which this mission is to be realized. We have also seen the approach, which is to be followed in our mission, namely, the Preventive System of Don Bosco, from whom we have received our charism. Here, in our journey, we have Jesus the ultimate example to fulfil the will of God, which is the mission of each and every one. Coming closer to our realities, we have Mary the model in our life to show us the attitudes that we need to possess, in following her Son. Let her *fiat* be ours in imbibing the charism and fulfilling the mission. Though our identity consists of rich values and attitudes, it is evident that there are many difficulties to arrive at its fullness, to live the charism and mission of the institute. There are many factors that can limit one's freedom to internalise the values of Christ. Therefore, we are looking forward to the future with our hope and our trust in God, who call us and be still with us through our journey. We pray that we will be faithful to our vocation and serve God and others more fruitfully.