

WITNESS OF FIDELITY, RICH IN HOPE. IDEALS, CHALLENGES, ANSWERS, RESULTS OF THE FIRST 30 YEARS OF FMA IN THAILAND

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Introduction

This paper, which investigates the first thirty years of the history of the Thai FMA Province of “St Mary Mazzarello” through the lived experience of its members from the first batch of missionaries who came to Siam in 1931 to the 14th group in 1961, takes on added significance in the context of the celebration of the 75 years of FMA presence in Thailand two years ago and our present project of completing the chronicles of the Province.

This article is the fruit of the research carried out on the chronicles of the communities and of the Province, and on certain documents preserved in the Central Archives of the SDB and of the FMA in Rome as well as in the Provincial archives of the FMA in Thailand. In addition to these, the written testimonies of some of our sisters, the writings of the Superiors, both FMA and SDB, and the important book of Fr Antonio M. Alessi¹ have served as sources. We have also thought it appropriate to involve the participation of the sisters who shared the history of the first 30 years and are still alive, in order draw upon their experience of community and apostolic life in all the aspects characteristic of our Salesian and Mornesian tradition.

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¹ Antonio M. ALESSI, *Con Maria nel paese del buddismo: l'ispettoria delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice in Thailandia*, Torino, LDC 1984 [Hereafter denoted as CMPB].

They know the history of the Province and are today witnesses of the fruits of the activities started and consolidated by them.

In exposing the present theme, we would like to take off from the “Conclusion” arrived at by Sr Anna Rosa Sivori² in the corresponding contribution at the previous Seminar of Hong Kong 2004, and hence consider this paper a continuation of the reflection on FMA consecrated life on Thai soil from its beginnings.

“In these past 75 years, the mission of the FMA in Thailand changed notoriously according to the times. In 1931, when the five pioneers arrived, the mission field was just a small village; now we have 11 houses all over the country.

“Today we are 91 FMAs in Thailand, and 74 are native sisters. All of us, except a few aged sisters, are involved in the assistance and the formation of children and young people in big schools, vocational centers, hostels and in small poor village centers.

“Our first missionaries lived in great poverty and endured with joy and generosity the labour and the privations of the hard beginnings. With their lives, they wrote beautiful pages of courage, sacrifices and authentic heroism. It seems almost unbelievable how our pioneers could give life to such a great enterprise”³.

Re-reading this conclusion, we can say that the sisters, especially those of the first four missionary expeditions, have expressed eminently well the charismatic vocation of the FMA through their personal, community, ecclesial and apostolic way of life.

We were persuaded to add “Witness of Fidelity, Rich in Hope” to the title of this article on account of the continual reference to the

² Cf. Ana Rosa SIVORI, *The Beginning of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Thailand. The First Twenty Years (1931-1952)*, in Nestor C. IMPELIDO (Ed.), *The Beginnings of the Salesian Presence in East Asia. Vol.II, The Salesian Family* (= Associazione Cultori Storia Salesiana- Varia 3), Hong Kong 2006, pp.67-73.

³ A.R. SIVORI, *The Beginning of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, p.73

concept of hope by the Superiors of the SDB and of the FMA, by lay people and religious, by the FMA themselves, as well as in the chronicles and annual reports with respect to the attainment of the educative goal, the response of those cared for, the growth of the proposed activities and the intervention of the Lord and Mary Help of Christians. Of these we would like to cite a few:

Fr Antonio M. Alessi SDB, author of the book commemorating the 50 years of the FMA in Thailand affirms: "I had the fortune of being close to and knowing personally the courageous few who spread the Christian faith in this faraway land, which is *today heading towards a more radiant future*"⁴.

Fr Gaetano Pasotti SDB, requesting the presence of the FMA in Thailand wrote: "*I am certain a wonderful field of work and of apostolate is about to open in this country, also for our sisters*"⁵.

Not less encouraging is the affirmation and testimony of Mother Cogliolo as recalled by Sr Teresa Merlo: "Our heroic sisters of Thailand [...] I am sure that the Madonna will help them to grow, to do much good, and one day also to have good vocations"⁶.

Fr Cesare Castellino, writing to the Rector Major regarding the growth of the Salesian foundation at Banpong stated the following in a letter which was later published in the Salesian Bulletin:

"[...] among our houses of Siam, that of Banpong seems to be destined by God to gather abundant fruits in the cultural and spiritual spheres of this nation. A little beacon of light in this zone which is a stronghold of Siamese Buddhism, being home to the most splendid and famous pagan temple, it now occupies a place in the vanguard, achieved through ten years of hard work and sacrifice"⁷.

⁴ CMPB, p. 8

⁵ Quoted in CMPB, p. 9

⁶ Quoted in CMPB, p. 55

⁷ Cesare CASTELLINO, *Incremento dell'opera salesiana a Banpong*, in BS LXIII (luglio 1939) 214.

In one of the outlines of the educative and apostolic work of the sisters drawn up on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the FMA presence in Thailand we read:

“This year, therefore, marks a jubilee year for the Institute in this country. But for the sisters concerned – the real protagonists of this anniversary – more than a destination arrived at, it is a goal to be attained. Having reached a milestone, they look forward with confidence to the future, ready for higher flights and greater conquests of charity and apostolate”⁸.

One last example: the FMA missionaries themselves had made their own the invocation “*In te Domine speravi, non confundar in aeternum!*”⁹.

1. An Overview of FMA History in Thailand

The thirty-year span from 1931 to 1961 covering the apostolic work and fecundity of the FMA in Thailand, characterized by its historical, political, social, cultural, economic, artistic, religious and spiritual legacy, may be divided into three periods corresponding to the terms of animation and government of the three Mothers General.

Initially the situation of Thailand was not well known to the Superiors General who, though desirous to respond to the first requests for FMA personnel for the education of youth, found themselves in socio-political situations not conducive to communication and to providing suitable and sufficient personnel to the different Provinces in the East. Despite the limits on direct and frequent communication, especially in the first decade of their missionary presence, there was never a lack of mutual interest and confidence on the part of the Superiors and the missionary sisters.

⁸ FMA Provincial Archives, Bangkok, [Anonymous notes on the occasion of the Institute's Silver Jubilee]

⁹ Quoted in CMPB, p.102.

1.1. *Term of Mother Luisa Vaschetti (1924-1943)*

The FMA presence in Thailand was one of those started during the term of office of Mother Luisa Vaschetti. During this period, in fact,

“Central houses for the formation of the missionaries were opened in Italy [...] Mother Luisa Vaschetti was described as ‘deeply and tenaciously Salesian’; she faced up decisively to the problem she considered of vital importance, namely, the formation of the sisters and the increase in vocations. Furthermore she maintained that the missionary aspect was fundamental and so the missionary expeditions continued unabated despite the difficult socio-political situation”¹⁰.

Subsequently our mission profited greatly from this policy, in terms of both quality of personnel and activities.

1.2. *Term of Mother Linda Lucotti (1943-1957)*

This period is marked by a World War (1939-45), which put to severe test the cohesion of the Institute and its ability for gradual reconstruction. Several sisters and youth fell victims to the war. Several communities and educational activities disappeared, especially in Eastern Europe and People’s China. Institutions were destroyed, communities were dispersed, sisters were deported to concentration camps or to prisons. Our two communities of Bang Nok Khuek and Banpong too were not spared the last mentioned fate.

Nevertheless, in the immediate post-war period, the internal development of the Provinces continued and in 1954 the Institute opened its first house in Australia, as well as in other countries of East Asia (Philippines, Korea) and Africa (Mozambique).

Mother Linda’s programme involved visiting those communities that had not received the visit of a Superior for several years.¹¹ She

¹⁰ “Mother Luisa Vaschetti” in <http://www.cgf.ma.org>, 02.06.09.

¹¹ “Mother Ermelinda Lucotti” in <http://www.cgfma.org>, 03.06.09.

sent one of the Councillors as her delegate to the provinces she was not able to visit personally. Mother Carolina Novasconi visited the mission of Thailand as her delegate on 5 March 1958. It was a very brief visit, lasting just a day, but sufficient to strengthen the bonds of fidelity and fraternal communion.

It was Mother Linda who, after careful discernment, decided to authorize negotiations regarding the acceptance of a school for the blind at Bangkok, in part also yielding to the pressures of the Salesian Bishop Gaetano Pasotti as well as other local civil authorities. They were particularly interested in entrusting the management of this institution to the FMA, having great confidence in the efficacy of their educative and administrative presence.¹²

The FMA in Thailand consider Mother Linda

“The noblest figure of a superior, who continued the tradition of those strong and loving mothers gifted to her Daughters by the Help of Christians to lead them in the work begun by their Co-foundress St Mary Mazzarello. [...] At her death, great was the mourning of all the sisters who had known her personally and felt as though they had lost a mother. The Provincial, Sr Antonietta Morellato said, ‘She was a real mother to us – loving, understanding and generous. We shall express our gratitude to her through our prayers in suffrage for her noble soul’.”¹³

1.3. *Term of Mother Angela Vespa (1958-1969)*

Mother Vespa was elected during General Chapter XIII held from 14-24 September 1958. We here refer only to the first three years of her term of office which have influenced the growth in quality and number of the FMA and their institutions also in our mission, which was in need of a more qualified communication, dialogue with the Superiors General and pastoral/professional preparation according

¹² CMPB, p.72.

¹³ CMPB, p.115.

to the principles of her government. She wanted to involve the FMA as much as possible in the preparation for Vatican Council II.

Through her formative communication, the Conciliar spirit and experience calling for a renewed vision of consecrated life, of presence in the society, of educational and pastoral mission and improvement in the biblical, liturgical and pastoral preparation of the religious re-echoed also here among the FMA in Thailand.

During these years, there was awareness of the dawn of a new era across the social, cultural, political and religious landscape, but it was impossible to foresee with any certainty the consequences of the altered situation at all levels.¹⁴

In these years Mother Angela guided the Institute from the Centre with the wisdom of her directives and through various gatherings and international congresses, notably the international catechetical congress of 1963, with the participation also of some FMA from Thailand.¹⁵

At the conclusion of General Chapter XIII she suggested to transfer the Provincial House to the capital Bangkok in spite of the difficulty of finding a suitable place. With maternal insistence she exhorted the sisters, "Pray much to Mary Help of Christians and you will see that what seemed impossible till today will be realized with her assistance! Only have faith and courage"¹⁶.

On this occasion, conceding the request of Sr Antonietta Morellato to be relieved of the role of Provincial for reasons of declining health, Mother Angela called her along with Sr Teresa Merlo who was to succeed her and told them, "Do everything possible to increase the number of vocations and the houses. I shall pray in a special way for this country and for the difficult work the sisters are carrying out"¹⁷.

¹⁴ "Mother Angela Vespa" in <http://www.cgfma.org>, 03.06.09.

¹⁵ CMPB, p. 119.

¹⁶ Quoted in CMPB, p. 119, from a Report of Sr Merlo, 23.06.1983.

¹⁷ Quoted in CMPB, p.116, from a letter of Sr Merlo from Bangalore, 26.06.1983.

Unable to visit the Province personally Mother Angela sent Mother Nilde Maule as Visitor from 18 May to 20 June 1958. Knowing that the Province never had a meeting with any of the Superiors from the Centre for a sustained period of time, she was lavish with her kindness, unmindful of fatigue and sacrifices. Though not enjoying good health, she wanted to visit all the houses thoroughly, speak to all the sisters, novices and aspirants, and offered ample opportunities also to the teachers, students and past pupils to meet her.¹⁸

This reference to the role of the Mothers General and indirectly to their Councils, and the response of the FMA of these thirty years of the mission, serve to highlight the witness, on the part of both sides, to the vitality of the Salesian and Mornesian charism.

2. Implantation of the Charism: Ideals and Challenges

This reflection on the implantation of the charism in Thailand is done in the light of the knowledge and practice of the Constitutions professed by the FMA missionaries first and then the native FMA who followed them. We would like to underline our conviction and theirs that

“The Constitutions are a mirror of the charism; they configure our charismatic identity and are therefore a constant point of reference, a perennial source of inspiration and verification for our daily life. Fidelity to the Rules is a guarantee of the future of the Institute as Don Bosco himself wrote in his Testament: ‘Divine Providence has prepared a happy future for our Congregation and its glory will endure as long as the Rules are faithfully observed’. For our first missionary sisters and for those of the subsequent groups, fidelity to the Constitutions was a must and it became for them a spontaneous expression of their witness. Further, in organizing the activities which they undertook based on providential signs, they carried out a process of discernment in accordance

¹⁸ CMPB, p.118.

with the spirit of the Constitutions, bearer of a charismatic project”¹⁹.

The fidelity of the sisters was the fruit of their knowledge and in-depth personal living of the renewed Constitutions approved by the Church on 4 April 1922. The scope of the Institute outlined therein described the ideal which became theirs with the assumption of the responsibilities accruing from their religious profession as FMA. It is fitting that we evoke this scope the better to appreciate their witness of fidelity to the FMA consecration and to the educational praxis in the preventive style.

Scope of the Institute

- i. The primary scope of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is the sanctification of the sisters who are its members, through the observance of the three simple vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and of their Constitutions.
- ii. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, therefore, shall strive before all else to practice the Christian virtues, especially charity, piety, kindness, spirit of work and sacrifice, after which they will dedicate themselves to the good of their neighbour.
- iii. A secondary and special scope of the Institute is to promote the salvation of the neighbour, through the Christian education of the daughters of the populace.

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians shall, therefore, open festive oratories, schools, nursery schools, orphanages, hostels for young working women and students, and trade schools for poor girls, also in the foreign missions.

¹⁹ Piera CAVAGLIA, *Le costituzioni segno dell'amore di don Bosco e a don Bosco*, Roma, Casa Gen. FMA 2005.

They may also likewise open educational institutions for girls, with a preference for those from humble backgrounds, and they shall not teach their pupils anything other than those sciences and arts, which are in conformity with and required by their social situation. It will be their task to educate them to piety, make them good Christians and capable eventually of earning their livelihood honestly; and in their work of Christian education and instruction of youth, they shall remain faithful to the teachings of their holy founder, Don Bosco.²⁰

In the light of these objectives we can offer some observations regarding the fidelity to the consecration and to the educative, pastoral, evangelizing mission of the 14 batches of FMA missionaries to Thailand, expressed through their lives and educational activities.

2.1. *As Women Consecrated to God: the Ideals*

2.1.1 Life of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience

The Virtue of Chastity was manifested in fraternal and joyous relationships among the members themselves of the community, in selfless and loving dedication to the children and girls to whom they extended maternal care and constant presence, in respect and reserve towards grownups who approached them and with whom they worked, aspiring only to belong to the Lord and to spread his Kingdom.

A typical example of this is the testimony we find in the chronicles and in the already cited book of A.M. Alessi regarding the service Sr Luigina di Giorgio used to render in the dispensary of the mission: "Even the Buddhist monks used to come in large numbers to the dispensary to be treated by her, even if the rules forbade them to be touched by a woman. But in the case of "ser Moo" (Sister Doctor) the superior was willing to make an exception"²¹.

The persons who approached the sisters and observed their way of life realized that they were women given to God and recognized

²⁰ FMA Const. (1922), 1-3.

²¹ CMPB, p. 38.

their identity as virgins, although many people, having no knowledge of religious life, when meeting them in different places, would ask them directly where they lived, whether the girls who accompanied them were their daughters etc.

The Virtue of Poverty was expressed by their normal, spontaneous, joyous adjustment to privations and discomforts of every sort. In fact, our sisters did not even consider them such, aware from the time of their departure for the missions that they would have even less than what they were used to; furthermore, comparing themselves to those who lived in the same surroundings they felt more the need to share with them the little or very little they had to satisfy their basic everyday requirements. "Life at Banpong began in the greatest poverty; plenty of work, lot of sacrifices and no conveniences. They were put up in a wooden shed, where they came together every evening to take rest"²².

It was the same subsequently in the other communities too. The experience of poverty and the continuous adjustment to the situations was, however, always lived with a great sense of trust in and abandonment to Divine Providence. Among other examples, that of the community of Udon (1960-61) stands out. The evening of their arrival an old Vietnamese woman came to the Directress and said, "Mother, your daughter has little to offer, but am happy to share with you all I have". So saying, she presented her a packet containing five eggs and five bananas, just sufficient for that first evening's dinner.

The school required various kinds of equipment. The amount available was placed at the feet of the statue of Our Lady Help of Christians and she was invoked to provide the rest. And she did. Someone came forward to arrange bus transport for the students. American soldiers were solicitous in sharing their resources and of their own initiative donated fuel, provisions and various other things.²³

²² CMPB, p. 48.

²³ CMPB, p. 126-131.

Also with regard to the organization of their activities our sisters had to face hardships due to the lack of funds to actualize their projects. But they were sustained by their trust in Divine Providence, not only in the initial period but also later on, particularly at the time of transferring the Provincial House from Banpong to Bangkok in accordance with the directives of Mother General and her Council in 1958.

“After much searching around, land was finally offered by the Salesians where their procure was situated on Saladeng Road. The Province being very poor, after one year the FMA did not still have the sum to pay the Salesians by the due date. But with the help of the Superiors and donations received from different sources the required amount was put together and to the great satisfaction of all we were able to keep our word”²⁴.

This new presence was inaugurated on 24 May 1960. Regarding the presence at Haad-yai begun in 1950, we have the testimony of the sisters who had gone to open this new institution about the insufficiency of funds for setting it up:

“Our Father St. John Bosco always started his works with meagre resources and much trust in God. Our own experience until now was that we too could do like this, but this time the undertaking seemed far beyond our strength and at a certain point we thought we could go no further. We lived through anxious moments, we prayed ... Probably this was needed to move our dear heavenly Mother! Finally the help came and the school was opened to welcome the students of the nursery and elementary classes ... and the lower and upper middle classes”²⁵.

²⁴ CMPB, p. 119.

²⁵ Archivio Generale FMA Roma [AGFMA], *Racconto di Sr Maria Baldo sulla fondazione della comunità ad Haad-yai anno 1950-51*.

To be poor was for our sisters also an exigency in order to express their solidarity with those entrusted to their care, with the people in general and with their individual and collective needs.

“Besides running the school, taking care of the women’s associations and of the kitchen and laundry of the Salesians, the sisters also started visiting the Christian families of the nearby villages. They were always welcomed in a festive manner, their visit being considered a real blessing from heaven. At times they also stayed overnight, accepting the hospitality of some family, sleeping on a mat spread on the floor like the people themselves, and eating whatever they offered with great cordiality. It was indeed the missionary life they had dreamed of!”²⁶.

During the Japanese occupation in 1942 the missionaries transformed themselves into “good Samaritans” multiplying the initiatives to extend assistance to the prisoners of war. They distributed medicines, food, clothes and kept up their morale by offering comfort, arranging for the administration of the sacraments, celebration of the Eucharist.²⁷

On 9 September 1954, a fire broke out in the town of Banpong and blazed from noon to 7.00 p.m. The fire caused by the wooden houses and oil lamps, the sole means of illumination, subsided only for want of these combustibles. Only a heap of burnt out rubble remained of the beautiful town, except for a few houses at the outer limits and the Salesian institution built across the railway, whose solidity served as a natural defence against the advance of the flames.

The terrorized girls watched helplessly from the school as their houses burnt down. Salesians, boys and FMA along with the bigger students, rushed to help, trying to carry to safety whatever could be salvaged from the flames. Our schools became refuge for everyone; the grounds were filled with merchandise of every sort – animals, sacks of rice, clothes, vessels, equipment, furniture, furnishings. During

²⁶ CMPB, p.36.

²⁷ CMPB, p. 63-64.

the first days they were converted into a camp for anyone without a house.

People from all over the country vied with each other with expressions of solidarity. The King, Queen and Ministers came personally bringing the first helps. Also the families of the boarders, who lived in the zone spared by the fire, brought clothes and provisions to be distributed to those who were so badly tested by fire. Fervent prayers of thanksgiving went up to the Lord and to the Madonna from the Salesians, FMA, Capuchin Sisters, Camillian Fathers and many others for the protection from danger. The town rose again more beautiful than before, rebuilt in masonry.²⁸

At Udonthani too our sisters had a wide range of social and developmental works on behalf of the poor families which were given provisions and useful things donated frequently and in abundance by the American soldiers, and clothing that came from other sources, even Australia.

Our sisters were generous with their help to the refugees from Laos, visiting them in the camps, comforting them lovingly and distributing foodstuffs, medicines and clothes.²⁹

These concrete lived examples of poverty attest to the adherence of the missionaries to the demands of their Constitutions, "Everyone should be content to have the worst things, and be prepared whenever required to suffer heat, cold, hunger, thirst, fatigue and contempt whenever it redounds to the glory of God, the spiritual good of the neighbor and one's own salvation"³⁰

The Virtue of Obedience was witnessed to by the example of their life in consistency with their Constitutions, "The virtue of obedience imposes on the sisters the duty of carrying out the dispositions of the Constitutions and of the Superiors"³¹.

²⁸ CMPB, p. 106.

²⁹ CMPB, p. 130.

³⁰ FMA Const. (1922), 51.

³¹ FMA Const. (1922), 58.

The existence of only a few communities in this mission land and the distance from the Superiors of the General Council on whom they directly depended, strengthened in the missionaries right from the establishment of the first institutions, the customary attitudes of consultation, docility and discernment in collaboration with them of the will of God on matters regarding the management of the institutions and their related apostolic activities.

Typical in this regard was the wait for the approval of the Superiors in order to take up an institute for the blind. This initiative was very much seconded by Msgr. R. Perros and Msgr. Pasotti, both of whom took great pains to get it entrusted to the Salesian sisters. Their apprehensions were obvious due to the lack of personnel and even more due to the urgency which did not allow time either for deliberation or to obtain the approval of the Provincial and the Rev. Mothers of the General Council, who were so to say left out of the scene.

A cablegram made its way across the ocean to seek permission. [...] Another brought back a negative response: the sisters in Siam were not prepared for such a task. The Lord willed that this reply should arrive a few hours after the deadline until which the Bishops and the eminent personalities had decided to wait for a reply.

The ecclesiastical authorities, certain that our Superiors would have accepted the institution, had given their solemn word to the Committee of the Institute composed of 25 members chosen from the cream of Siamese nobility. It was now impossible to retract without detriment to the image of the Catholic Church. The sisters were in a painful dilemma. But it did not last long. A rapid succession of airmail letters made the situation perfectly clear to the reverend General Council, and their full and whole-hearted consent arrived on 15 August, before the institute was actually entrusted to the sisters.³²

³² CMPB, p.61.

Our missionary sisters have given testimony “to obedience in the spirit of faith, seeing God in the Superiors”³³; they had filial reverence for and docility to Bishops, Provincials and Salesian priests to whom they were accountable or who requested their collaboration. In the same filial spirit they accepted the directives of animation and administration from the Superiors, both of the General Council as well as local, during the period of foundation and gradual expansion of the mission. Here are some examples of letters which exhorted the addressees to renew themselves in this virtue so much esteemed and inculcated by Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

“The spirit of lively faith that you always display and the unshaken trust that God offers also to this nation his hour of special Christian comforts, encourage me to augur that every day you may be happier in your religious life, every day better and more observant. If your obedience is prompt and serene, or better still, if it should require the sacrifice of our habits and views, in this faith and in this meritorious love we shall sing our victory”³⁴.

2.1.2 Practice of Christian Virtues

Positive references are not wanting in the lives of the FMA missionaries also with regard to the second article of the Constitutions which says, “The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, therefore, shall strive above everything else to practice the Christian virtues, especially charity, piety, kindness and the spirit of work and sacrifice”.

Some of the sisters of the first 30 years who are still alive testify that they had lived up to these virtuous attitudes through mutual support and accompaniment, despite the limits of their nature and professional upbringing. Some facets of these Christian virtues were warm hospitality, industriousness and a spirit of sacrifice, sobriety coupled with sincere joy, courage tempered with prudence and

³³ FMA Const. (1922), 59.

³⁴ FMA Provincial Archives, Bangkok, *Relazione della visitatrice straordinaria Sr Leonilde Maule, Bangkok 19.06.1959.*

discernment in undertaking apostolic and educational initiatives and services, solidarity with the people, untiring availability in responding to the needs of missionary apostolate, even at the cost of great sacrifice. It evoked great wonder in the people to see these religious who, donning an apron, worked tirelessly side by side with the workers to prepare a welcoming ambient for their dear daughters.³⁵

There are several testimonies regarding the humility of the sisters on various occasions, among which that of Haad-yai:

“Not everyone was happy that European sisters had come to open a school, because they feared strong competition. One of the influential people, owner of a private school not far from where we were to open ours, did everything possible to prevent us. He even approached the Director of Public Instruction in Bangkok to impede our obtaining permission to open the school. But one fine day a sudden storm, accompanied by lightning, thunder and fierce winds, razed to the ground our adversary’s school! The school, built of wood, was probably consumed by termites. The sad fact was that the poor guy could not re-open the school on time for the new academic year.

“What was more amazing was that the opening of our school being delayed due to his complaints, the people who were not aware of his underhand moves to stop us, continued to come to us for admission. [...] In the first year we admitted only girls from the first to the fourth elementary classes. Only students of the school affected by the storm were, out of consideration for the owner, denied admission. But knowing that his school would be opened only in the second semester, we asked if he would like to send his daughter provisionally to ours. The man was really moved by our thoughtfulness first of all in not taking his students and secondly in inviting his daughter to our school. He immediately accepted the offer, hoping probably that the child might pick up English well from us!

³⁵ CMPB, p. 86.

“This gentleman turned out to be very helpful to us thereafter and still continues to be a good friend of ours. See what Mary Help of Christians teaches and helps us to do for this dear pagan nation!”³⁶

Another example of humility is from Bangkok, the school for the blind, from where the sad fact of the first defection among the sisters took place. The sister who left levelled a series of accusations and humiliating allegations against those who remained. Accordingly voices began to circulate that the Italian sisters should be sent away and that the blind inmates were very unhappy on account of the departure of the Thai sister. The Committee began to give ear to these insinuations and the sisters on their part suffered in silence, praying to the Madonna to make truth prevail.

In the face of these insinuations the members of the Trust failed to appreciate the dedication of the FMA. The sisters nevertheless continued to lavish their care and attention on those dear youngsters in order to make them come to terms with their situation and assist them to become self-sufficient and to be of help to their families.³⁷

Another Christian virtue much cultivated by the FMA was piety, particularly Eucharistic and Marian, which have their nourishment and expression in the liturgy. Whenever they were about to begin a new foundation or buildings had to be put up, the usual request of the sisters was always to construct the chapel first before anything else, so that they could have the presence of the Eucharistic Lord in the house. Thus at Haadyai the construction of a chapel, where for the first time the Eucharistic sacrifice was celebrated on 3 May 1954, was a much awaited and longed for grace. The lack of a place where to preserve the Blessed Sacrament, to gather in prayer and to participate together with the whole community in the Holy Mass, was the greatest privation the sisters had to bear during the five long years from the beginning of the foundation. Besides, it was a great

³⁶ AGFMA, *Racconto di Sr Maria Baldo*.

³⁷ CMPB, p.76.

inconvenience having to go daily early in the morning, at times in the wind and in the rain, to the residence of the Salesians for the practices of piety.³⁸

Love for Eucharistic Jesus was inseparable from love for the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose presence was equally felt by the sisters both individually and as a community. According to one of the accounts, the first to confirm this was Sr Luigina Di Giorgio. While travelling by boat along the river, during the final tract before arriving at Bang Nok-Khuek, Sr Luigina suddenly burst into tears. Everyone gathered around trying to comfort her. Calming herself somewhat she was able to explain herself. 'It is not homesickness or regret', she said, 'but the exact sight of what I had seen in a dream before setting out. I had seen with absolute precision all what our eyes are beholding now – the canal with its dark water, the small boats crisscrossing it, the palms stretching skyward, the little houses perched on the bank, the huge bunches of bananas semi-hidden by the giant leaves ..., and finally we shall see the church of Our Lady which is awaiting us'. In fact, at the end of the trip they would see the tall spire of the belfry of the Church of the Nativity of Mary.³⁹

Love for Jesus in the Eucharist and for the Virgin Mary disposed our missionary sisters to take up initiatives of fervent preparation for the feasts and solemnities of the liturgical year as well as the celebration of special anniversaries. Such preparation was not limited to them only, but was done with the participation of the girls in their care and the people to whom they offered their developmental services in the area where they lived.⁴⁰

On the occasion of the definition of the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in body and soul to heaven on 1 November 1950, event of exceptional importance for the whole church, the sons and daughters of Don Bosco, brought up as they were in his school,

³⁸ CMPB, p. 102.

³⁹ CMPB, p. 11.

⁴⁰ CMPB, p. 35.

could not but participate in the joy of the whole believing world and solemnly celebrate the great event.

That year as part of the celebrations of the Jubilee Year there was also the visit of the “Pilgrim Virgin” of Fatima, with the statue of the Madonna of Fatima arriving in Bangkok on 2 December 1950 at 13.00 hours. A motorcade consisting of 300 cars awaited the arrival of the Immaculate Virgin at the airport. For the first time hymns and prayers in honour of the Blessed Virgin re-echoed in that Buddhist city. Police forces were employed to ensure order, as the traffic was interrupted for four hours in the two main arteries of the city. Nothing of the like had ever happened in connection with a religious ceremony. 10,000 Catholics and 90,000 adherents of other religions consisting of Buddhists, animists and Muslims, participated. Three-fourths of the students were non-Catholics, each carrying a lily in hand, singing Mary’s praises. Catholic Ministers and Consuls of various nations too joined the procession. A similar sight was never seen in Thailand, where only a few years earlier in 1940, a real persecution had been unleashed against the Catholic Church.⁴¹

Not less solemn was the welcome accorded the “Madonna” at the Salesian mission of Ratburi on 11 December. On this occasion too the FMA did not spare themselves in the preparations for welcoming and honouring the Mother of God, participating in all the celebrations in Bangkok, at Banpong and Bang Nok Khuek. As though to reward them for their love, the Madonna sent the gift of a white dove that accompanied her all through the entire pilgrimage in Thailand.⁴²

It has been noticed that devotion to the Virgin Mother was always the first sign of positive response to the educative pastoral action of the sisters. A simple testimony of a blind boy on the feast of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December 1949 abundantly proves this. During the academy, in the presence of the Archbishop, relatives

⁴¹ CMPB, p. 92.

⁴² CMPB, p. 93-94.

and important personalities, while the hymn “*Andrò a vederla un dì...*” [I’ll meet her one day] was being sung, at one point a newly baptized boy burst out as though struck by a sudden revelation, exclaiming “Oh, what a joy! I never thought of it. In heaven I won’t be blind any more and I will be able to see the face of the Madonna!”⁴³

Communities and institutions of the FMA have been named after “Mary” in the certainty of her maternal presence; in her name and on dates of her liturgical feasts houses and important activities have been started; her statues and pictures have adorned places accessible to everyone. While announcing the construction of a new school building at Haad-yai, Sr Morellato the Provincial said, “I invite everyone to pray with faith. This year as we celebrate the centenary of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, we shall try to obtain from the Madonna this grace [of completing this building]”⁴⁴. She also invited the day students and the boarders to do the same. Everyone responded to the invitation.

The Madonna did not disappoint them. Before long a proposal for the sale of a large plot of land almost in the centre of the town arrived. It was exactly what they had always wanted... even if it had remained a forbidden dream on account of the exorbitant price the owner was asking. They had even, in keeping with a Salesian tradition, furtively thrown medals of the Help of Christians into the plot. Now it was up to the Madonna to remove the obstacles and help her daughters to construct a school where many youths would come to know and love her.⁴⁵

The year 1959, being the first centenary of the apparitions of the Madonna at Lourdes, was celebrated in Marian spirit. To commemorate this extraordinary event it was decided to build a beautiful grotto at the Narivooth school (Banpong). Blessed on 11

⁴³ [Anonymous], *Festa bianca nella casa dei ciechi*, in BS LXXIV (maggio 1950) 176.

⁴⁴ Quoted in CMPB, p. 101.

⁴⁵ CMPB, p. 101-102.

February, the date of the first apparition, it soon became a favourite destination for visits and prayers of both the sisters and the students, including Buddhists.⁴⁶

The new house of Bangkok on via Saladeng was opened on 24 May 1960. Promoted by Msgr. Chorin, Archbishop of Bangkok, it had the scope of providing social and religious assistance to Catholic youth who attended the high schools in the city and those who worked in private families of the capital. By the express wish of Rev. Mother General it was to be also the Provincial House. In fulfilment of a vow made by her, Sr Teresa Merlo ordered a beautiful statue of Mary Help of Christians from Italy, which was placed on a pedestal at the entrance to the courtyard, for the protection of her daughters and the boarders. The boarding was placed under the protection of Mary and named 'Auxilium'.⁴⁷

These examples testify how our sisters nourished their faith and their response to the Lord after the example of our Founders. For this reason they were always conscious of their Salesian vocation. Love for Don Bosco and for St Mary Dominic Mazzarello found expression in very spontaneous and joyful celebrations, especially following their canonizations. On Easter Sunday, 1 April 1934, Don Bosco was canonized and elevated to the highest honours of the altar by Pope Pius XI, who had known him personally. At the solemn ceremony of canonization the King and Queen of Thailand were present in St. Peter's, Rome, expressly come for rendering homage to the Saint who had sent his sons and daughters to their land. The canonization of Don Bosco was then solemnized in all the houses, but especially at Bang Nok Khuek, the centre of the Thai mission. The sisters as usual were very generous with their cooperation in rendering homage to their Father and Founder.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ CMPB, p. 118.

⁴⁷ CMPB, p. 121-122.

⁴⁸ CMPB, p. 41.

Regarding the canonization of Mary Mazzarello, we read in *Con Maria nel paese del buddismo*:

“Another happy event has brought immense joy to the entire Salesian Family: Blessed Maria Domenica Mazzarello, co-foundress of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, has been raised to the honours of the altar on 24 June 1951. At the propitious occasion also Thailand was represented. The choice fell on two missionaries of the first group who still have their parents in Italy, Sr Morellato and Sr Amati. Twenty years had passed since their arrival in Thailand and they had never imagined that they would once again see their family and motherland”⁴⁹.

We wouldn't like to omit another charismatic aspect of the Salesian vocation of the FMA continuously safeguarded and renewed, namely, love and fidelity to community life with all its implications both with regard to personal exigencies as well as to situations pertaining to living and working together.

In the animation and management of the works entrusted to each community the sisters sought to consolidate their bonds of fraternity through the joyous as well as the painful events, in order to make their educative presence fruitful among those entrusted to their care and among their collaborators in the educative field. We shall illustrate their experience of community life with an example from the period of the war, 14 years after the start of the mission. Following the frequent raids from the beginning of 1945 until the terrible one of 21 April the Salesians, Capuchins and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians took refuge along with others at Bang Nok Khuek. Only Sr Lauton and Sr Bonmassar remained to guard the house. During the quiet period at Bang Nok Khuek the three communities resumed their regular life in the hope of better times to come, intensifying their prayers that the good Lord might shorten for them and for the whole world the anxieties of the trial. The community of the Daughters of

⁴⁹ CMPB, p. 96-97.

Mary Help of Christians had also the joy of making their retreat and on 14 May, as the culmination of those days of greater intimacy with God, had the satisfaction of assisting at the religious profession of three Thai novices.

When the nightmare of the war finally ended on 15 August 1945, feast of the Assumption, at the news that also Japan had surrendered, these communities gathered together to thank the Lord who, amidst many threats and difficulties had preserved them safely. After two years of anxiety and separation, the religious could return to their houses and resume their activities. After some misadventures the sisters reached the house of Banpong towards 9.30 p.m., tired but happy to be back home. The following day was hectic putting things in order, but the joy was great of being together once again and narrating all the misfortunes and misadventures of their long period of forced separation.⁵⁰

2.2. *The Challenges as Salesian Educators*

The secondary scope of the Institute is to contribute to the salvation of neighbour by providing Christian education to the daughters of the populace. The commitment to the spiritual growth of the sisters in their vocation as FMA, consecrated women, apostles and educators was always desired, valued and nurtured with the best means at their disposal. This was a valid contribution which, together with the providential presence of the Lord and the tangible assistance of the Virgin Mother, enabled the sisters to plan and manage their institutions where children, youth, collaborators and benefactors found a place of welcome.

It is actually in their direct intervention in the fields of education, evangelization and pastoral activities that their witness of faithful love to the Lord has borne apostolic fruits. They were able to face and overcome challenges and difficulties in their everyday educative

⁵⁰ CMPB, p. 68-69.

experience, always with the ideal of contributing to the salvation of the persons entrusted to them.

The challenges were present right from the first years of their missionary presence. A.M. Alessi has a chapter dedicated to the difficulties of adaptation wherein he expressly describes how the first FMA missionaries took up their mission whole-heartedly, overcoming with their constant dedication the inevitable difficulties and inconveniences of daily life.⁵¹

It was a challenge in the first place to adapt themselves to the new ambient, culture and style of life, totally different from theirs and previously unknown. The new language rendered absolutely impossible any sort of communication or understanding. It was also in the interests of the Salesians that they learn the language at the earliest; so someone offered to teach them. For half an hour daily everyone attended the lesson, with the exception of Sr Di Giorgio who, with her fame of a proven tailor and her medical skills, immediately found full time work – cutting and stitching clothes for the missionaries, and treating the sick who flocked to the dispensary.

The missionaries of all the batches had to go through this process of learning, eventually with the help of the sisters themselves, taking also the exams in order to qualify themselves for teaching. Learning the language of the place has always been the first stumbling block they had to overcome. There were many an instance of not understanding and even of misunderstanding what was said, with the final outcome of a hearty laughter. Armed with a holy patience and much good will, the sisters like little children began to babble the first words and the different tonalities, repeating them hundreds of times in the course of the day. The glaring mistakes contributed to keeping alive the spirit of cheerfulness in the community.

In addition to this there was the need to adapt to the food, rather scarce and devoid of vitamins and calories. The only drink

⁵¹ Cf. CMPB, p. 30-34.

was tea and rain water collected in large tanks and hence lacking minerals, or river water carefully boiled.

The hot and sultry weather generally at room temperatures around 35°C came down to 20°C or so only for a couple of weeks in the year. This greatly weakened the physical constitution.⁵²

On account of these adverse conditions the sisters contracted sicknesses such as elephantiasis and malaria, on account of which some of them had to return to their homelands for health reasons.⁵³

Another challenging factor during this initial period was the introduction of indigenous sisters into the community. At their arrival the FMA were temporarily put up in the house of the “*auxiliary women*” attached to the girls’ school with 150 students. It was a community of eight women who had been assistants of the Salesians, advanced in age and afflicted with various ailments. They had dedicated themselves to the service of the Church and for many years rendered valuable assistance to the Salesians. Teaching of catechism had become their only activity. In the house there lived also orphan girls and some women who worked as maids.

Our sisters, brought up in other settings and with a different mentality, did everything possible to adapt themselves to the usages of the community out of respect for them and because the primary reason for which they were called was to cooperate with them in the formation of the personnel and to help in the work the Salesians were carrying out. It was the idea of the Salesian Bishop Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti to invite the FMA to take care of these women – Catholic women who had dedicated themselves to the service of the Lord and to the mission – and eventually to replace them.

Adaptation to the Thai situation demanded also knowledge of the Buddhist religion, of its local practices as well as a deeper knowledge in view of establishing positive relationships with its followers who were our charges, collaborators or acquaintances.

⁵² CMPB, p. 30-34.

⁵³ CMPB, p. 40.

Ninety-five percent of the Thai population consists of followers of Buddhism, declared “official national religion” by the Constitutions of 1932. It is impossible to understand the mentality, culture, civilization and traditions of these people without reference to Buddhism, which has always had and still has a decisive influence on the history, art, culture and customs of this country.

Buddhism also constitutes the greatest difficulty to the spread of Christianity which, after many centuries does not yet count 200,000 members. The majority of converts are native Chinese, Laotians, Annamites or from animist tribes that live in the north of the country.⁵⁴

In the beginning there was a certain freedom of religious expression, on account of which the celebrations, catechesis and pastoral activities could not only be conducted peacefully but were also attended by the people out of esteem for the missionaries. Subsequently for political motives, and at times due to a spirit of competition on the part of the Buddhists, conflicts arose.

With the outbreak of World War II the situation became even more tense. It was further aggravated by the Thai-Indochina conflict in 1940, which resulted in the rupture of diplomatic relations with France. The government demanded the restitution of the territories ceded to French Indochina in 1897. The deteriorating relationship with France paved the way for a certain amount of hostility against the Church. All the French missionaries in the capital and in the eastern provinces were confined to house arrest in Bangkok; many preferred voluntary exile instead. Even the native clergy, formed at the school of the French missionaries, were subjected to vexations and violence, inflicted by a fanatical group. The Salesians, majority of them Italians, were left in peace and could thus partly substitute the pastors who were forced to abandon their flocks.

The hostility towards the Catholic Church, however, grew even more violent. On 11 February 1941 the head of the government invited all the Thais to proclaim themselves Buddhists, inciting the Catholics

⁵⁴ CMPB, p. 18.

to renounce their Christian religion and declare themselves followers of the Buddha. The slogan they adopted was 'a true Thai is a Buddhist'!⁵⁵

The imprisonment and assassination of the seven Thai martyrs and the blessed martyr Fr Nicola Bunkerd Kitbamrung belong to this period. However, wherever we had established presences for the benefit of children and youth we were respected even when the government, especially some education ministers, adamantly insisted on displaying symbols of Buddhist religion in the schools. A.M. Alessi affirms, "The progress of the Church in this country of the East was therefore slow, difficult and painful. But today, in the country that may be termed the most Buddhist in the world, the prospects of peace and progress have opened also with regards to Catholicism for the good of the nation"⁵⁶.

Another challenge that put to the test the faith and fidelity of the sisters just 10 years after their arrival in Thailand was World War II with its immediate consequences, particularly the persecution of lay persons, religious and priests belonging to the nations involved in the conflict.

The global conflict: With the outbreak of World War II the situation became very tense. The hostility towards the Catholic Church, or to be more precise against the "French Church", became even more violent on account of which missionary fathers and sisters, forced to be confined to Bangkok, preferred voluntary exile. Though the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, majority of them Italians, were left in peace, after the episcopal consecration of Mgr. Pasotti the situation was such that practically all the Catholic schools had to be closed.

The same situation prevailed also at Banpong. Nevertheless Sr Rose Moore and Sr Cecilia Phalavasu, of Irish and Thai nationalities

⁵⁵ CMPB, p. 27, 56.

⁵⁶ CMPB, p. 29.

respectively, repeatedly went to Ratburi, the provincial headquarters, to obtain permission for re-opening the school in the new scholastic year. They prayed, invoked the assistance of the Help of Christians and finally on 28 March 1940 the education minister gave them permission to re-open the school, but only for the pupils of compulsory schooling, and that too only the elementary section. Later, with repeated requests and journeys to Banpong-Ratburi-Bangkok and vice versa, they got permission to take in all the students of compulsory schooling from 8 to 14 years of age. In those trying circumstances it seemed a 'miracle' to be able to contact so many girls and educate them.⁵⁷

Japanese occupation: In 1942 from Burma the Japanese entered Thailand, an ally of Germany and Italy then. It was the cause of serious danger for our institutions and our girls. The beautiful feast of the Immaculate Conception was saddened with the alarming news that the Japanese had entered Thai territory, spreading destruction and panic. The people, majority of them Chinese, fled to the forests for safety. The sisters sent the boarders home and prepared themselves for the worst. On 19 December a Japanese official took into custody Sr Rose Moore who was Irish but having a British passport. Due to the insistence of Sr Maria Baldo, the superior, she was allowed to be detained in a small building of the mission, alone and guarded by seven soldiers. On Christmas day, however, she was taken along with two Salesian clerics who were enemy nationals of the Japanese to a concentration camp in Bangkok where there were already 500 prisoners.

Even during the period of detention Sr Rose continued to be a source of great edification for all, generous with her assistance in alleviating the sufferings of the internees, so much so she was freed before the others. With great joy she returned to the community on 18 February 1942.

The discrimination against the Catholics continued more or less openly. Religious instruction was forbidden in the schools. So our

⁵⁷ CMPB, p. 55-59.

sisters conducted catechism classes for the Catholics clandestinely in small groups, hiding themselves in the convent of the Capuchins or in the ironing room of the Salesians. If the Catholics wanted to get jobs they had to renounce their faith. The saddest sight was the inhuman way the prisoners of war were treated.

In the beginning of 1943 the authorities ordered the evacuation of Bangkok and Banpong; foreigners were especially forbidden to remain at Banpong which was declared a war zone. Our sisters were particularly concerned about finding a place and persons to whom they could entrust the three young Thai sisters. On this occasion they experienced the solidarity and the kindness of the sisters of other congregations. The Sisters of St Paul of Chartres offered them their house at Siracha in the South of Thailand.⁵⁸

From prison to exile: One of the hardest trials during the war was the absolute lack of news from relatives and the total separation from the Superiors in Turin and even from the province headquarters at Madras. Of great consolation were the radio message of the Rector Major, Fr Pietro Ricaldone and a letter of Mother General, Sr Linda Lucotti, received through the Red Cross after a four months' delay.

A fresh storm raged with the surrender of Italy on 8 September 1943. The Italians who were till then allies of Japan suddenly became enemies and the Italian missionary fathers and sisters were unwittingly caught up in the new situation. That evening the Japanese police checked the documents of the Salesians, FMA and Capuchins, ordering them not to leave the house. The police also went to arrest Sr Maria Baldo and Sr Stefania Bonmassar who were at Bang Nok Khuek. But knowing the situation, they left the place and spent the night at Ratburi, from where early next morning they took the train to Banpong. On arrival there, they got out on the opposite side of the station and reached the house without being noticed by anyone. To prevent their possible deportation by the Japanese, on 11 September the Thai authorities declared the Italian sisters under arrest and confined them

⁵⁸ CMPB, p. 60-64.

to the convent of the Capuchin sisters, while the Thai Capuchin sisters joined the Thai FMA in our school. The two groups were forbidden to meet. But knowing the good they were doing in the education of youth, they were allowed to continue to run the school which remained in the hands of the three Thai FMA and the three novices. They were told to remove the chapel from the school building and not to leave any religious symbols in the class rooms so as not to provoke the animosity of those who were opposed to Catholic schools.⁵⁹

Promotion of local vocations and cultural preparation of personnel: Another two challenges our sisters had to face were the promotion of local vocations for responding to the increasing number of pupils, institutions and other educational structures, and the cultural preparation of personnel for a constant updating of the quality of their educative and pastoral action.

The problem of indigenous vocations has always been the most persistent in Thailand, given the scanty number of Catholics, the opposition of families and the lack of aptitude on the part of candidates for community life. Only after seven years of the Institute's presence did the first two Thai youngsters profess in 1938, and one of them left the congregation as a perpetually professed member. After that till 1962 there were only 12 others, who joined at intervals of three, four or five years. Thailand still belonged to the Indian Province of St. Thomas then.

From 1931 to 1961 missionary sisters arrived only every two or even three years to reinforce the numbers – in all 14 expeditions. Until 1959 some of these were also expected to look after the formation of the diocesan sisters. Bishop Pasotti as also his successor Msgr Pietro Carretto had this new congregation very much at heart and wanted to give them a solid formation with a specific Salesian stamp. Hence they appealed to our sisters who, notwithstanding the shortage of personnel, finally consented.

⁵⁹ CMPB, p.65-66.

The number of the FMA, missionaries and indigenous sisters together, was never sufficient to look after the girls whose number kept increasing year by year in all the institutions. They always felt their inadequacy in front of the demands of instruction and education of the girls whom the Lord drew to our houses and of the trust of the parents who entrusted their daughters to their care. The realization of their limits, however, was always coupled with their commitment to getting the necessary qualifications for running the institutions with the help also of lay persons, who were indispensable especially for teaching in the schools.

The significant growth of the institutions year by year is ample evidence of the commitment and continual updating on the part of the sisters despite the experience of poverty and the adverse socio-political conditions.

3. Answers and Results

It's encouraging to view the coherent and creative response of the FMA during the first 30 years in Thailand with reference also to the Institute's second scope already quoted, namely, that of the education of girls especially those poor also in the foreign missions.⁶⁰ They have given proof of wise planning and prudent administration in carrying out the activities that were suggested by the circumstances. We shall present them briefly.

3.1. The Village of Bang Nok Khuek

The first field of apostolate of the FMA in Thailand was at Bang Nok Khuek, as collaborators of the Salesians. Just six months after their arrival the sisters were able to handle the none too easy language and hence in a position to take full responsibility for the management of the school and the various parish activities. Some changes were introduced tactfully and with respect to the elderly native teachers. Each Sister had her responsibility, a new scholastic

⁶⁰ Cf. FMA Const. (1922), 3.

time table was adopted and the number of the orphans was increased, for which a new teacher was assumed. Complying with the request of a few families they also opened a nursery school in the village of Wat Nai.

Another activity which made the work of the sisters known and appreciated was the dispensary. Sr Luigina di Giorgio dedicated herself to this service with great enthusiasm and obtained surprising cures, though still incapable of speaking the Thai language.⁶¹

As more space was needed for the school, the possibility of purchasing a large two-storey building in masonry – the ex-seminary of the Salesians – was promptly considered and the school was transferred there. The Provincial, Mother Clotilde Cogliolo wanted to see it herself in order the better to make the arrangements for its purchase.

3.2. *Banpong, the First FMA Institution in Thailand*

The Salesians already working at Banpong in the province of Ratburi insisted on having the help of the sisters. Msgr. Pasotti while inviting them insisted, “Here you have a vast field of work and it is high time that you begin a second presence”⁶².

They started off at Banpong in 1936 by assisting the Salesians in the management of the kitchen, laundry and wardrobe. Only in 1938, after several procrastinations from the start of the academic year, the sisters were constituted into a religious community dedicated to the Sacred Heart and started the school housed in wooden structures.

On her return in March 1939 the Provincial, Mother Cogliolo, completed the transfer of the sisters from Bang Nok Khuek to the house of Banpong, which became their first independent institution. Four sisters stayed on there in the first house to help the sisters of the diocesan congregation – one as superior of the community, another

⁶¹ CMPB, p.35-36.

⁶² Quoted in CMPB, p.48.

as the mistress of novices, and the other two in charge of the school, workshop, dispensary and parish activities – until the time when the nascent congregation would be in a position to manage on its own.

To accommodate the increased number of students the house of Banpong was further expanded with a new building blessed on 16 October 1952. The sacrifices encountered from the beginning permitted the FMA to lay a sure foundation for the marvelous work that would come up there – the Narivooth School, one of the most sought after schools in Thailand.⁶³

3.3. *School for the Blind, Bangkok*

Towards the end of 1946 the Provincial, Fr Pietro Carretto, successor to Fr Giovanni Casetta, encouraged the superior Sr Maria Baldo to accept the invitation of a rich American lady, Miss Genoveffa Caulfield, to take over her Institute for the Blind. Herself blind from the age of three, she had started a Trust for the education of the blind in Thailand with the programme “Help the blind to help themselves”. Before returning to the USA she wanted to entrust her institution to reliable persons and so thought of the FMA.

It was a completely new field of apostolate for the FMA, difficult and demanding at the same time. Msgr. Perros, Archbishop of Bangkok, too intervened so that the sisters might accept the offer lest it should go to the protestants who were very eager to take it up.

With the consent of the Mother General Linda Luccotti the sisters gave their assent, even though they foresaw the difficulties ahead. The sisters were entrusted with the direction of the institute, and Sr Rose Moore and Sr Cecilia Phalavasu took charge of it in September 1947. The ownership, however, remained with the Trust, which had the right of supervision and control. The Trust consisted of a committee of 25 persons chosen from the cream of Thai nobility.

It is always difficult to begin a centre for the care of persons with serious disabilities. It’s even more difficult to continue one like

⁶³ CMPB, p.45,48,52-54.

this meant for both sexes and different ages, especially by people without any specific preparation in the assistance and education of the blind. Furthermore, the sisters found themselves in an extremely poor setup, lacking many things. However they rolled up their sleeves and got to work courageously.

Eventually the facilities were improved and despite certain relational problems within the Committee, the sisters faithfully lent their collaboration. The government itself constructed a large three-storey building with halls and efficient didactic tools capable of integrating teaching with other educative experiences so that the blind students could be imparted both intellectual and moral education, which would prepare them for their eventual insertion into a society in the process of development. The sisters and pupils moved to the new building on 24 February 1950.

Here the boys and girls of the boarding school attended regular courses, while those of the high school went to schools outside. Those better endowed were given the possibility of attending University either at Bangkok or in the USA, where Miss Caulfield followed them up and sent them to pursue degree courses. Our sisters intervened personally and continuously in offering the students the double orientation of studies or trades by conscientizing the lay people in responsible positions to take care of the education of the pupils. Even the acquisition of reading and writing skills using the Braille system was endorsed and promoted by them. Great care was taken also for teaching music with the use of common as well as typical Thai instruments. Thus two hundred blind students aged between six and fourteen, each with his/her painful past, learnt to appreciate the gift of life, and through study and work made the best of their talents and assured for themselves a better future.⁶⁴

The sisters considered themselves fortunate to dedicate their best energies to the poor unfortunate youth, creatures exceedingly sensitive to all expressions of concern and responsive to every noble

⁶⁴ CMPB, p.71-78.

and generous sentiment. Their only aim was to make the lives of the youngsters more useful and serene and lead them on the path to heaven.⁶⁵

3.4. *Haad-yai, the Third FMA Institution in Thailand*

During her special visit in March 1949, the General Councillor Sr Carolina Novasconi considered the proposal of Msgr. Pasotti, “Mother, now that the storm raised by the war is over, I think the work of the sisters will expand if you send fresh personnel”⁶⁶. While observing that the requests were many that kept arriving from different nations, she promised to consider the need to help the sisters so that the good they were doing with their apostolate could be extended wider. He then presented her the possibility of a presence at Hua Hin, a town which according to the Bishop had a great future besides being in a healthy location. They went for an inspection of the place, but could not comply with the desire of the Salesians.

The request to send missionary sisters was heeded later in the same year 1949 for the first time after the war, with the arrival of the fourth group of missionaries. The three new sisters and some of the Thai vocations were greatly encouraged at the prospect of opening a new field of apostolate, already planned from 25 August 1949. On the occasion of the visit of the Provincial Sr Teresa Merlo the possibility of opening a new house at Haad-yai, a commercial city in the extreme south of Thailand, was deliberated.

The Salesians were already there, invited by a wealthy Chinese who had donated a large piece of land to various religious confessions for starting social works. Msgr. Pasotti and the Salesian Provincial insisted with the FMA Provincial saying that it was the most modern and most important city in the south and that their presence would undoubtedly be a valid contribution to evangelization in that part of

⁶⁵ FMA Madras (Ed.), *Silver Jubilee Souvenir 1922-1947*, The Good Pastor Press, Madras 1948, pp.57-62.

⁶⁶ Quoted in CMPB, p.81.

the country where Catholic minorities lived deprived of all religious assistance.⁶⁷

Twenty years after our arrival in Thailand the sisters were invited by a protestant lady to open a school for girls at Haad-yai and the sisters were eager to start soon. Msgr. Pasotti prudently exhorted them to go slow and discern well before making a decision. Haad-yai was a non-Christian centre and the Catholic Church did not have a support base in the south; hence it would be difficult to start a school there, though at a later period it would still have been possible. Furthermore, before starting the school it would be necessary to be well prepared with modern school premises and well trained qualified personnel knowing English.

The Superiors at the level of the Congregation and of the Province were contacted for permission, which reached through the Vicar General of Msgr. Pasotti. The superior was handed an urgent letter asking her to prepare immediately the papers for opening a school at Haad-yai. The sisters were filled with joy at the thought of a vast new field where to make known the name of God and of the Blessed Virgin.

Divine providence sent help from unexpected quarters to defray the initial expenses. A house constructed in wood was bought and on 10 June 1950 Thidanukhro School was opened. The joy and excitement of the three Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was indescribable as they heard the sweet voices of 350 children repeating word by word the Sign of the Cross and the Hail Mary!

By the following visit of Mother Teresa Merlo the sisters had, with the permission of Mother General, found a plot of 31 Rai (42,000 square meters) for the further development of the school exactly at the place where they had dropped medals of the Madonna. This time too Mary Help of Christians heard their prayer. The Provincial who was coming to Thailand for the second time visited Haad-yai for the first time. She was surprised at seeing so many students crammed in

⁶⁷ CMPB, p.81-83.

such a limited space and advised that adequate premises be provided. It was high time to construct up to date buildings.

On 24 May 1958 Thidanukhro School was shifted to more convenient and comfortable halls. On 24th May 1961 the nursery and the boarding, constructed with the proceeds from the sale of the first 'small house' which very much recalled Mornese and other contributions from the Province, were inaugurated. Also this school of ours, very much esteemed by the authorities and people, made a name for itself among the finest and best managed schools in Southern Thailand. It was a source of great joy for us as we could thus make the Catholic Church shine forth. With the teaching of catechism and Christian morals to more than 1000 pupils, almost all of them non-Christians, we could make God and the Blessed Virgin known, which is the scope of our life.⁶⁸

3.5. *Bangkok – Hostel and New Provincial Office*

Shifting the Provincial office from Banpong to Bangkok was right from the beginning also a response to the exhortation of the Superiors General who wanted the FMA presence in the capital in order the better to serve the needs of the houses. Another reason for starting a second presence in Bangkok was the urgency in opening a students' hostel for young women who flocked to the capital to attend the University and were forced to take up residence in private houses or in public hostels with all the consequent risks and dangers.

The chronicles mention 24 May 1960 as the date of opening of the new house, indicating clearly its scope. The foundation endorsed by Msgr. Chorin, Archbishop of Bangkok, had the scope of providing social and religious assistance to Catholic girls who attended high schools in the city and those who worked as maids in private families of the capital. As per the express wish of Mother General it was also to be the Provincial House.⁶⁹ On 25 June the Archbishop himself

⁶⁸ AGFMA, *Racconto di Sr Maria Baldo 1931-1970*.

⁶⁹ Cf CMPB, p.119-121.

blessed the chapel and declared it a “semi-public oratory” entrusting its pastoral care to the Salesians of Don Bosco.

How many generations of youth have passed the most beautiful period of their life within these walls! How many of them have been settled in life thanks to the intervention of the sisters, and how many more have found here a port of safety from the dangers of a big city! The hostel was placed under the protection of our Blessed Mother and was called ‘*Auxilium*’.⁷⁰

3.6. *Udonthani, the First FMA Presence in North-East Thailand*

The fifth FMA presence in Thailand was at Udonthani. With the transfer of the Provincial office to the capital new avenues of apostolate were opened for the sisters. The Salesian Provincial Fr Ruzzeddu proposed a new presence in the north, desired by the Prefect Apostolic Msgr. James Duhart, Redemptorist, who wanted also for the girls a work like that of the Salesians, with elementary, middle and high school.⁷¹

Despite the acute shortage of personnel and finance in which the Province found itself the proposal was accepted. Msgr. Duhart himself contributed much towards the construction of the school, boarding, chapel and residence of the sisters for starting off the presence there. Besides the school, yielding to the insistence of the Bishop, the sisters opened also a crèche for abandoned children. The guardian angel of these babies deprived of the most basic affection of parents was Sr Teresina Larghi, very affectionate to these little ones literally hungry for affection and caresses besides for food. Always bending over their cradles, she was ready with a smile for one, while amusing another by rocking the baby in her arms that it might stop whining, quick to attend to anyone who claimed her

⁷⁰ CMPB, p. 122.

⁷¹ CMPB, p.124.

attention. Many of them, snatched from death through the loving care of Sr Teresina, were later adopted by families from different nations.⁷²

Our sisters were also generous with their assistance to the refugees from Laos, to whom they distributed food, medicine and clothes, visiting them in the camps and consoling them with great charity.

To ensure the continuity of these activities the sisters always had at heart the formation of the young members by providing suitable personnel, premises and programmes to respond to the requirements of their specific spiritual and apostolic formation, even to the extent of sending them to the provincial headquarters in India.

4. A Particular Instance of Sharing and Transmitting the Charism

The diocesan congregation of the *Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary* is for us the first fruits of the experience and the direct transmission of the vocational charism entrusted to Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello by the Spirit. The two Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Sr Luigina Di Giorgio and Sr Antonietta Morellato, were the first instruments docile to the action of God for the formative and pastoral journey of the members of this Congregation. These sisters carried out the service requested of them in guiding the first steps of the nascent Congregation, in the spirit of the FMA Constitutions – those approved in 1922 – which they themselves professed, as reiterated by Sr Maria Sompong Thabping in her work on the role of the FMA in laying the foundations of religious life of the Institute of the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.⁷³

⁷² CMPB, p.130.

⁷³ Cf. Maria SOMPHONG THABPING, *Tho.Mo.O.Phu ob-rom wanlak chiwit nakbuat khong Phu-rapchai duang-roethai niramom khong Phra-nag* [The FMA who laid the foundations of the religious life of the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary], Hua-Hin Tha, SIHM 2003.

The implantation of the charism by the first FMA in Thailand is recognized and testified with gratitude by the SIHM Sisters with their lives and by their testimony at the conclusion of the book just cited. "There's no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends". These words were fully realized in Jesus. His disciples and all the missionaries after them have borne witness to this great love for one's neighbour. Leaving their parents, brothers and sisters they have offered their life by following Jesus in the mission lands, communicating the good news and his life so that everyone may be saved.

The initiative of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in sending missionaries to Thailand produced many apostolic fruits, among them giving life to the new religious family '*Ci-songkhro*' and taking care of it in collaboration with Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti its founder. The fruits did not consist only of dying in order to give new life, but also nurturing it with dedication until it grew up and became strong.

Conclusion

Every community of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians established in this missionary land and every service entrusted to them was administered adopting the style of animation proper to the preventive system. The spirituality and the style of life of the preventive system urged the FMA and all their collaborators to a constant renewal of their educative presence.

The sensitivity to recognize, esteem and bolster reason, religion and loving kindness in the formation of the educators and in the interactions with the youth was gradually guaranteed through formative moments incorporated in the daily, monthly and annual programmes. Our sisters were specially attentive to the choice of teachers who, till the 1970s were unmarried and hence more free to dedicate their time and energies to the service of education in our settings. Our sisters tried to sustain in them the educative intentionality specific to our charism in order to make them capable of collaborating in the project of forming the identity of our young beneficiaries – that

of being “*good Christians and honest citizens*” with the Salesian characteristics of “*piety, study/work and joy*”. In administering and animating their activities, the sisters were mindful also of the Buddhist religious reality of their charges, respecting and upholding their cultural values.

Our students of these first thirty years are witnesses of the good they received from the sisters and teachers. These are more available than those of later years in attending the annual meeting of the past pupils.

The missionary experience of our sisters of the first 14 groups of missionaries and of the first seven batches of indigenous vocations is much more significant and laden with rich testimonies than what the limits of this paper will permit to recount. This is, however, more than sufficient exhortation for us in this first decade of the third millennium. We are more than indebted to them for the gift they made of themselves for the expansion of the Kingdom of God in Thailand through their witness of bridal relation with Him and their dedication in starting and consolidating various educational services.