

THE ARRIVAL OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS IN THE FAR EAST

*Grazia Loparco FMA**

Introduction

The arrival of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) in the Far East is characterized by the educative nature of the institute, by its missionary commitment between 1922 and 1950, within the missionary impulse of the Catholic Church, which entrusted this undertaking to Religious Congregations using specific strategies.

One must go back to these circumstances in order to understand some of the difficulties that appeared both in the management and development of the works linked to the missions, both as institutional relationships with the Salesian Superiors who, at times, contemporarily have both ecclesial and religious authority, and in other circumstances as two distinct persons who need to clarify their reciprocal juridical positions. Among the Salesians, and even more among the FMA, we do not see the missionary themes discussed on the European level; this leads us to believe that the missions were seen mostly from the pragmatic point of view.

The economic factors were not secondary when it involved requesting personnel; nor when the possibilities of developing presences and works were called for. Besides this, we need to look at the missionary mentality that prevailed: the missionaries had to put together the explicit requests of those responsible with their desire to characterize the various works with the educative spirit of the institute.

The ecclesial and social-cultural climate of that period gave rise to the Apostolic Vicars promoting Religious Congregations among the indigenous youth. Often, the FMA were asked to collaborate in the foundations and beginnings of such institutions, acting as temporary superiors. Events in China, Japan and Thailand make us reflect on the relationship existing between these foundations and the admission of indigenous youth into the Institute of the FMA; and a wider reflection on the genetic components of the various members of the “Salesian Family”, especially the common spiritual patrimony.

* Sr. Grazia Loparco is professor of Church History at the Pontifical Faculty of Science of Education of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Rome, Italy.

On this background, we see the great problems of inculturation; development of the Catholic Church in multi-religious contexts afflicted by the problems of international politics; relationships between missionary Religious Congregations, and, not the least, difficulties in communication and mutual understanding between these countries and the General Council resident in Italy.

This research explores precisely the argument from the point of view of the authority, to whom requests for foundation and the first resonance of the life in the mission would arrive. The description of the works in the different nations would be the object of the other communications.

1. The Missionary Relaunching of 1922

1922 coincided with the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute of the FMA and was the occasion for renewing the missionary thrust (with the symbolic mandate of 50 missionaries).¹ The General Council planned to entrust each province with a different mission to care for both financially and in terms of personnel, coming to a concrete decision in this matter.²

Besides the missionaries already present in South and North America, and in the Middle East,³ new frontiers opened towards Eastern Europe, Poland; Asia, India in 1922; and China in 1923.⁴ After several years, the FMA arrived in Japan, 1929, and in Thailand (Siam), 1931. After World War II, in connection with the expulsion from China in the beginning of the 50's, houses were founded in the Philippines, in Korea, in Australia; and at the beginning of the 60's, in Vietnam.⁵ Later on, a foundation was opened in East Timor.

¹ The missionaries FMA sent out between 1877 and 1952 are divided in this manner: 1877 to 1908, 679 missionaries; 1909 to 1928: 518 missionaries; 1929 to 1952: 1,062 missionaries. Total: 2,259.

² Cf AGFMA, *Verballi adunanze Consiglio Generale dal novembre 1913 al novembre 1924*, 5 October 1922.

³ Latin America 1877; Asia (Bethlehem 1891), Africa (Algeria 1893; Congo 1926). In 1920, Mother Daghero wanted to send missionaries to Australia, but did not obtain permission.

⁴ Following these, we have the foundations of Shanghai, Macao, Hong Kong.

⁵ In 1924, the General Council took up the theme of a foundation in Australia, but decided to wait for more information and postponed the decision. Cf *Verballi adunanze Consiglio Generale... 1913-1924*, 21 agosto 1924.

The new missionary impulse of 1922, after the war, was in harmony with the general ecclesial commitments.⁶ In this period, 1924-1943, Mother Luisa Vaschetti was the Superior General. She, herself, was for 20 years a missionary in Argentina (1883-1903), before being called to be the private secretary of Mother Catherine Daghero.

Differently from what was happening in America where the missions were founded to serve the Italian immigrants, in Asia there was no talk of "Italianization" seconded by the government. This term alludes to the language and culture, especially faith values, the figure of the Pope and the Founder of the Congregation; it encompassed a Catholic identity to preserve in a land far away from home. For the Far East, instead, there are direct dealings with the propagation of the faith which entrusted the missions to the Salesians. In Italy the fascination for these lands grew.

The FMA arrived in the Far East on the invitation of the Salesians. They were aware of the special characteristics of the territory and specified some of the requirements necessary for the missionaries. Before inviting other Congregations, they turned first to their Sisters in the "Salesian Family", making known, however, that a refusal would mean that the Salesians would look for others, so as not to deprive the mission of a fundamental component. There was an increased quality with respect to the first generation. The requests arrived on the table of a General Council which was often working in those years not only to find the correct person⁷ for each work, but the means as well, and they were often working to improve formation strategies.⁸

The minutes of the General Council meetings registered several interventions of the Rector Major, Fr. Philip Rinaldi (1925, 1929, 1930) who, when asked to give his opinion, invited all to have great care for the houses of formation for the missionaries. At the same time, he had such foresight (which we call today projectual mentality) to assure continuity

⁶ After the *Maximum illud* of Benedict XV (30 November 1919), with the encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* (February 28, 1926) Pius XI promoted the foundation of local congregations in the mission territories, giving preference to indigenous vocations; often these vocations, especially the women, remained in a subordinate status in the European Congregations.

⁷ In these years, the missions sought missionaries who were "strong, young, educated with specific abilities". *Minutes of the General Council meetings 1913-1924*, 28 August 1924.

⁸ In 1924, a missionary aspirantate was opened at Arignano (TO) along with the Missionary House of Mother Mazzarello (Torino, Via Cumiana) for the professed destined for the missions; they followed a course of study to prepare themselves professionally for the missions. In 1928, the missionary novitiate was opened at Casanova of Carmagnola (TO), for candidates from various nations.

and development, both for missions already in existence and for new ones. In the General Chapter IX (1928), he gave recommendations for the missions, just as Fr. Ricaldone did.

In 1930, Fr. Rinaldi encouraged greater organization of the missionary issue, with long range planning which could assure vitality to the missions already opened and adequate formation of the personnel destined to become missionaries.⁹ In order to select the right personnel, plans were made for a council member to visit the more promising Italian novitiates and interview the novices at the end of the canonical year (the first year of novitiate) so as to get to know the young people who that year could make the missionary application.¹⁰

Besides this, on different occasions, the Rector Major expressed a favorable attitude towards indigenous vocations, especially for India and China, countries which presented great difficulty for foreigners for both language and customs, not to mention mentality. With difference from the others, these nations, including Japan, appeared to be promising for the recruitment of vocations; thanks to the ancient civilization, culture and traditions. His opinion was that this formation needed to take place locally, some of these indigenous vocations could live in Italy for a few years to get to know the spirit of the Institute better while getting professional qualifications.¹¹

⁹ Cf *Minutes of the meetings of the General Council 1929-1932*, 22 October 1930.

¹⁰ Cf *Ibid.*, 2 September 1931.

¹¹ "Sixth problem, indigenous vocations. [Suggestions given on various occasions gathered here by Ceria] This is how the Benedictines, Capuchins and Jesuits have done and are doing it so as to reach even the most unwelcoming parts of the world; this is the spirit of the Church. This is an undeniable fact: those countries are more interested than we in doing good to their own people, know their own surroundings better than we so as to use all for the greater good and with greater care. The indigenous people know their own language, do not need to overcome the difficulties of becoming accustomed to the climate, nor deal with the inevitable difference between the indigenous people and strangers; they can require their compatriots what can never be obtained by those coming from outside their area. Thus, you can see that one gains on all sides. How to do this in practice? Especially for India and China, have the Novices make the novitiate in their own country; then, those who seem more promising, send them as professed to Italy for a few years to perfect themselves with studies or vocational training, and drink the genuine spirit of the Institute. Generally, for the foreigners who come for the Novitiate in Italy, it is not convenient to have them stay on for several other years [...] Call some of them from all parts of the world to prepare them as well as preparing the future. Yes, call them for the novitiate, having them stay on for a bit of time so as to sustain the houses and the spirit in their nations; all this is good, but do not make laws. Treat each case individually since it is clear that not all cases will produce the same hopes and the same results". Eugenio CERIA, *The Life of the Servant of God Father Philip Rinaldi*. Torino, SEI 1947, pp. 400-401.

In 1931, the missionary dimension of the institute was formalized, choosing a formula for the missionary ceremony for the religious and a special missionary feast day, distinct from what the Salesians celebrated.¹²

2. From the Requests to the Foundation

The missionary openness towards China was very alive in the FMA plans, even among the young girls and children.¹³ In 1908, the boarders at Nizza Monferrato enthusiastically responded to the missionary proposal of Fr. John Fergnani, missionary in China from 1906 to 1912, to found the Holy Childhood Association.¹⁴ The Association was launched in January 1909 with the support of Fr. Versiglia: children and young people offered prayers, small contributions, especially good works, for the missions.¹⁵ Even the work of the Holy Innocents, with their *Annals*, increased interest for the Chinese children.

In this atmosphere, Fr. Luigi Versiglia made his pressing appeal to Mother General, M. Catherine Daghero (1856-1924).¹⁶ The Vicar Apostolic of Canton had just assigned to the Salesians an immense territory in the north of Kwangtung with 6 million inhabitants. Among so many “gentiles” there were also an ancient Christianity very rich in vocations. The character of the people was “humble and simple, very disposed to accept Christianity” and the climate of that part of the country was better in comparison with the South.

The Salesians were given two years to take the place of the Society of the Foreign Missions and Fr. Versiglia committed himself right away to “preparing a place for our Sisters without whose collaboration our work

¹² It was decided to hold the feast on the Sunday after that chosen by the Salesians. Cf *Minutes of the General Council Meetings 1929-1932*, 2 September 1931. For the formula, an agreement was reached with Fr. Rinaldi who was present for the meetings on September 11th. That year the celebrations were foreseen to be on the first Sunday in October.

¹³ The Salesians arrived in Macao in 1906, and at the end of 1917, they arrived on continental China at Shiu Chow.

¹⁴ See the invitation by Mother Marina Coppa, Councilor for Studies, in her circular letter; China was also in the missionary dreams of Sr. Teresa Valsé Pantellin.

¹⁵ On the occasion of the 25th anniversary, a small publication: *The apostolate of the innocent in its first twenty-five years of life among the FMA*. Turin, 1st. FMA 1934, manuscript.

¹⁶ On 6 January 1918, he took up again the discourse begun a year and a half earlier, when there was only the hope that the Holy See would grant the Salesians a mission, which “would be truly Salesian, and consequently include the Sisters as well”.

for women would be impossible". It was thus necessary, to prepare personnel. Sisters were not needed for the ordinary work in the kitchen, cleaning or household chores since local personnel could be found for these services; also, it would not be appropriate for Europeans to do these works since they would be "looked down upon by the proud Chinese", and thus it would become quite difficult to do any good. What was needed were teachers, especially English and even French teachers, experts in embroidery, music, design, and, if possible, even someone prepared in medicine, with a license. In China, there was greater need for "heads rather than arms".

It seemed better to await for the right persons rather than begin badly: "The peoples of the Far East have a pretty proud [altero=fiero] temperament. You cannot be successfully accepted by them without showing an evident superiority in knowledge and ability. There were expectations for a showy education, one that would even include gymnastics. Besides the organizational and professional abilities, mature and virtuous persons were needed to set the foundations of the future work: charity, understanding, maternal care, leaving no space for envy and jealousy. Fr. Versiglia suggested to send Sisters who were between 25 and 35 years old, who, because of their youthfulness, a good health could learn the language, and who are mature enough not to be over impressed by customs that were very different, courageous in accepting without discouragement the necessary sacrifices.

Sr. Palmira Parri, the first Superior, kept up correspondence with the Superiors and with Fr. Rinaldi over the years, explaining the characteristics of the context from her viewpoint, the requirements for the missionaries, and thus the necessary care in choosing the Sisters, as well as their preparation in Italy, along with the difficulties met at various levels.¹⁷

In 1928, Fr. Vincent Cimatti insistently asked for the FMA in Japan, after the Salesians founded their works there a couple of years earlier.¹⁸ In his letter to Mother Luisa Vaschetti (1857-1943), he reassured her of

¹⁷ The works entrusted to the FMA in China were orphanages, Holy Childhood works, a boarding school [collegio] for girls from well-to-do families, the formation of catechists for the indigenous people, perhaps already foreseeing a religious foundation. Works of assistance included services for the blind and for the elderly. In 1925, a teacher training institute [Normal School] was begun for the formation of teachers.

¹⁸ Precisely at the time when he felt the missionaries could learn the language and begin the works.

the house, the food, and the expanse of the apostolic field open to them; at the same time he asked that the Sisters be solidly formed in piety and chastity, intelligent, capable and patient in facing the “very difficult” character of the Japanese people. Since this was an independent mission, Fr. Cimatti was also the ecclesiastical superior, he did not hide the poverty of the mission even in a well developed nation.¹⁹

He informed the Sisters that they would find the girls already organized in associations. He suggested that each missionary be prepared to be “isolated, like a child” incapable of good communication for at least two years.²⁰

Sr. Letizia Begliatti’s first letter to Mother General, of 2 March 1930, sometime after she had arrived, showed her commitment to adapt herself to the totally new customs.²¹ The presence of a young woman aspiring to become a religious caused two questions to be posed to the General Council in the month of October.²²

Thus, it seems that on one side, there appeared to be an interest in indigenous vocations who would serve better than foreign religious; there

¹⁹ The cost of living was equal to that in a large Italian city. He gave details of what to include in the trousseau, objects and useful materials, items and their cost in Japan; he also made reference to gifts that would attract the interest of the Japanese people.

²⁰ The agreement on the contract [convenzione] was made concrete with the General Economist, Mother Arrighi, who had understood the importance of instruction as well as manual and artistic abilities for the missionaries who would need these characteristics in proportion to the good they wanted to do in these lands. After learning the language, the Sisters saw open before them a vast field of work in the schools, vocational centers, kindergartens, which Fr. Cimatti had called «day assistance for children», the daily oratory and after school activities.

²¹ A prolonged rainy season, the solitude and the gentleness of the people, the sadness of “living surrounded by pagans”...

²² The first regarded the date for beginning the Novitiate. Sr. Letizia noted that August 5th was the least suited time in the Japanese climate since the change from using the kimono to the religious habit would have coincided with the hottest time of the year with respect to Europe. She thus asked to be able to try setting the date for December 8th, a date very dear to the heart of St. John Bosco. The second had to do with the fact that the Japanese seemed to have “a character that was difficult to understand, very sensitive and easily changing”, she suggested changing the length of time for the Aspirantate as well as fixing the Postulancy at twelve months. Cf text of the typewritten page (probably an extract from a handwritten letter) of Sr. Letizia Begliatti to the FMA General Council, Miyazaki, 7 October 1930, in AGFMA 121 02-302.

is on the other hand, the need to adapt the rules to the needs of the environment.²³

The registration of the children was slow, seeing as teachers, Christians and foreigners. It would be necessary to strive to prepare religious teachers who were not foreigners, or at least, someone who could imbue “grit and initiative” and introduce the educational method of the institute into the kindergarten. In other words, after a year and a half of experience, the Superior presented Mother General with the pressing request for qualified personnel.²⁴

In the meantime, at the end of 1929, a request for founding an FMA presence in Siam, with the approval of both Fr. Rinaldi and Fr. Ricaldone, was received. The first answer from Mother General was concise: lack of personnel. Six months later, Fr. Adolfo Tornquis²⁵ noted that in Siam there was space, work, sun... the only thing lacking was money. It would make it easier to live the vow of poverty there. The Siamese people were educated and well disposed toward foreigners, and the language was not too difficult.²⁶

It seemed opportune to wait a few years until the personnel could be prepared to what was foreseen. However, after several days, the decision changed; probably this was due to the counsel of Fr. Rinaldi who was a very prudent man, and especially for the suggestion of Fr. Ricaldone,

²³ In 1931, the first formation house was approved in Beppu after the request appealed to the fact that “necessity does not have rules”. The kindergarten Miyogio, Morning Star, was inaugurated. The poetic title was attractive to the “pagans” (this was the Superior’s comment when she explained on its meaning for the Catholics). Cf letter of Sr. Letizia Begliatti to Mother General, Beppu, 18 August 1931, in *ibid*.

²⁴ Even though she knew the lack Turin was already feeling, for an increase in the works of the FMA with an educational quality adequate for meeting the needs of the environment, Fr. Cimatti, on his part, underlined the continued linguistic difficulties, but also the need for FMA to take greater risks to uplift the lamentable economic situation surrounding them. Cf letter of Fr. V. Cimatti to the Mother General, Miyazaki, 11 May 1931, in *ibid*.

²⁵ Visitor and benefactor, he sent Mother Daghero a picture of the house reserved for the sisters, together with the promise of several young women ready to enter the Institute.

²⁶ In July 1930, Msgr. Pasotti wrote a reminder, in view of sending the missionaries out. He appealed to the spirit of sacrifice and of adaptability, and described the presence of several good educational institutions for girls which were especially staffed by French Sisters, offering the same courses as in Europe, including English and sometimes French. He wanted to entrust the FMA with an elementary school in BangNokKhuek, an oratory, medical center, kindergarten, orphanage, and catechism. A nursing Sister would be a wonderful means of making progress. Various types of women’s work, medicine, religious objects of a certain value that could win against the ... pagan competition! At the end of October 1930, the Superiors were still uncertain about accepting the proposal for the foundation; Fr. Rinaldi invited them to get to the core of the issue and express their intention of going or not, and if yes, when would they go.

who pushed for the foundation, following the insistence of Msgr. Pasotti. The adhesion of the General Council came on 6 May 1931; yet, they still had to look for the missionaries adapted for the work of foundation in the month of July. On 17 August, Msgr. Pasotti wrote thanking them for the confirmation of the foundation and adding details for its organization; he also included the program for the feast of the XV centenary of the Council of Ephesus. The Sisters arrived in Siam on 14 November 1931, and their travels were narrated in the Newsletter of the FMA.

Sr. Maria Avio, who was already a missionary in India, was the Superior of the first group. A few weeks later she lamented with the Superiors the lack of clarity with their program of action. Fr. Ricaldone, who was questioned on the matter, noted that after the first phase of getting settled in, it would be necessary to send in a Sister who was gifted with a spirit of initiative. The missionaries would have to resign themselves to use one or two years to learn the local language as well as a bit of English, too. In effect, Sr. Maria Baldo was to have been the missionary with initiative, increasing the works in a markedly Buddhist land, which for a good number of years would give few vocations.

3. Commitment to adapting as well as facing economic difficulty

The missionaries' letters testify to their availability to serve as needed, according to the initial requests, and the effort to develop works that respond to the spirit of the Institute.

Various aspects of daily life required flexibility, from food and climate to types of housing, customs regarding women's education and collaboration with lay personnel, to traveling and traditions.

For education and instruction, the social setting was considered so as to offer something in keeping with development potential, as was already being done in other parts of the world. Especially in China, in 1928, we have this testimony:

"If some orphans show a special aptitude for studying, have them continue their studies so that they can eventually become teachers to replace the pagan and protestant teachers who are presently teaching at the orphanage and mission schools. There are also extern students who number about 40, all paying the tuition fee which goes to the benefit of the house. In the orphanage there are four elementary classes, three intermediate and one each of I and II Normal".²⁷

²⁷ Description of FMA works in China, June 1928, anonymous original in the FMA Archives, 13.6501-1-10.

In an important letter to Fr. Rinaldi in 1929, Sr. Parri lamented the scarcity of personnel, and admitted that much good was being done visiting the families. This was a report on the first six years of the mission. She insisted especially that missionaries should be versatile and self-sacrificing, capable of going easily from refined work to humble work, especially that which the Chinese would not (accept) to perform. The missionaries felt that only the christian faith would make them open and available to the needs of charity.

Some references were to the schedule, to the habit of giving punctually loans that had been approved, to the wish of preparing some girls who could become the first collaborators after improving the level of learning which was very low. In this way, the letters showed the fatiguing *iter* of the development of the missionaries' strategies, including a home for the elderly and a house for *Kuneong* (consecrated catechists), and helper women (not always trustworthy) for some services such as shopping and housework.²⁸ In all of the works, there is missionary assistance which is integrated by a few external students who could pay the tuition fee. As for the orphanage, it was projected that opening a knitting shop would offer a sizable income, but a Sister who was expert in this trade was not present in the mission.

Though the FMA mission in China, Japan, and Thailand were very different from each other, they did have in common, the uncertainty due to the difficulty of the language, the impossibility of founding great works due to the lack of means, absence of local support, and a lack of enthusiasm in the request for their presence. In the beginnings of these missions, Fr. Versiglia assured the Superiors:

"Regarding the finances, I assure you that just as we are able to make a living, so will they, and as long as there is bread and rice for us, there will be the same for them. The last bit of bread and the last portion of rice will certainly not be for ourselves, but will be reserved for them. I am sure that they will do all they can, and thus Divine Providence will not be lacking to us".²⁹

²⁸ Cf the description of the works in China, June 1928.

²⁹ Extract from Msgr. Versiglia's typewritten letter of 20 April 1920 in the FMA Archives (13.65 01-1-01). This is a memorial addressed to Fr. Vincent Bernardini, who was scheduled to leave Macao for Turin for the International Congress of Salesian Cooperators and Past-pupils, held in occasion of the inauguration of the monument dedicated to Don Bosco. The entire memorial is in the Salesian Congregation's Archives, A 3520506. The context is clear in Guido Bosio, *Martiri in Cina. Mons. Luigi Versiglia e Don Callisto Caravario*. Leumann - Turin, Elle Di Ci 1976, pp. 172-173.

The restraints were felt when it came to enlarging the Sisters' work in 1925 with a school for the formation of teachers, an expense which the mission had to face. Perhaps this was the only courageous initiative which characterize the FMA who were always attentive to the needs of the girls for instruction.

The slow development of the works prolonged the dependence of the Sisters on the Salesian Fathers more than what they had foreseen. We can see a clear echo of this from Fr. Ricaldone's evaluation (he was the prefect and visiting Superior in the Far East at the end of 1927). He wrote to the Rector Major that, following his return, they would need to study the questions raised by that Vicariate as well as by the missions in the East. In that region the Vicars and Apostolic Prefects usually helped the religious only in the beginnings of the works, until they could become autonomous. It seemed that the FMA Superiors had other criteria. In China they were still being sustained by Msgr. Versiglia (after five years) and this called for an urgent solution, given the necessity of deciding various particular cases (probably linked to the development of the works). He concluded: "Our Sisters in the East have a great future; however, they need to clearly outline the way and the program".³⁰

In Japan, too, the Sisters were living in great poverty. They were dependent on the mission at Miyazaki, and it was clear that they still needed a couple of years to learn the language and give a good foundation to the works, while they were working in the Salesians' laundry and wardrobe. Before the end of the two years, Fr. V. Cimatti proposed that the FMA open a kindergarten in Miyazaki so as to become more independent; the other reason was that he could no longer meet the expenses their maintenance incurred. The international economic crisis placed the Sisters and the Superiors in serious difficulty, since they had to contribute to the upkeep of the house in Beppu as well where Fr. Tornquist had originally given help, but was then unable to do so due to financial difficulties. In 1932 the Sisters sustained Beppu, but were unable to commit themselves for Miyazaki, and were disposed to leave that work and send the missionaries to other works.

In October of the same year an economic globalization took place: the FMA received a donation from a benefactor of the Orphanage in Nizza Mare (France), the general economer of the Salesians encouraged the

³⁰ Handwritten report by Fr. Peter Ricaldone to Fr. Philip Rinaldi, on board the Pilsna, 11-12-1927, in ASC F 158.

councilors to express their thanks to the Rector Major (who probably had a very active role in this donation) and to buy the kindergarten at Miyazaki, thus avoiding bankruptcy for Fr. Cimatti. The councilors agreed, taking the funds from those put aside for the beatification of Mother Mazzarello, simultaneously sending the French province the reimbursement of the amount necessary for acquiring the kindergarten in Japan as soon as that would be possible.³¹

4. Collaboration with the Salesians

In 1923, the Salesian Visitatoria was born in China, with Fr. Ignatius Canazei as its courageous guide; in that same year, the first FMA arrived. It is understandable that between the tribulations and resettlement, an attempt to define the physiognomy of the works and collaboration would take place.

On his arrival in China in 1927, Fr. Ricaldone found a memo by the Provincial, Fr. Canazei, which touched on the question of the relationship between the FMA and the Salesian Superior and the Apostolic Vicar, Msgr. Versiglia:

“The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. There is a fundamental question to resolve, as religious, are they under the care of the Provincial, representative of the Rector Major? Sometimes the Superior of the FMA community would like to discuss things with the Provincial; however, it is clear that as long as they are completely dependent on the Apostolic Vicar, the Provincial can do nothing, except listen to her. The FMA’s are all still at Shiu Chow and Hosai. Besides the usual difficulties all have experienced, especially at the beginning in China, they have those of personnel, and the difficulty of dealing with the Delegate Vicar (Guarona); it seems that he interferes excessively in their affairs, seeing them as servants of the missionaries...”³²

Fr. Ricaldone found that the three works of the FMA were still under only one superior. He also noted the excessive interference of Fr. Guarona (Pro-Vicar) in certain moments, even if the spiritual assistance was important. Fr. Ricaldone’s reflections had repercussions in Italy. In June 1928, a description of the works was sent to the Superiors, including the three houses

³¹ Cf *Minutes of the General Council 1929-1932*, 23 October 1932, in AGFMA.

³² Memo of the Provincial, Fr. Canazei to the visiting superior, Fr. Ricaldone. July 1927 [AIC, Provincial Archives].

with their means of sustenance: the orphanage-school,³³ religious instruction, difficulty of setting up the oratory for various problems (not described in detail) with the Salesians.³⁴ Besides, Msgr. Versiglia – it is said – wants the feasts of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, the Ascension,

“To have the Sisters with the catechists go to the different districts so as to better prepare the christians to celebrate the solemnities with due respect. Up to now this has not been done because of divergence of ideas, or better, because the superior does not see it as being in conformity with the spirit of the institute”.³⁵

The superior, instead, lamented with the major superiors the lack of personnel as the reason for not being able to do more visits among the people. Thus the motivations given did not coincide when it came to justifying the insufficient presence among the people, both far and near. One could sense a certain tension between the availability of the FMA, faithfulness to the spirit of the Institute, and the requests for evangelization put forward by Msgr. Versiglia who, as Apostolic Vicar, had the full responsibility for the christian community. These were spread out according to an older strategy of missionary presence that dispersed the forces of missionaries, forcing them to live in isolation most of the time.

At the end of 1928, Msgr. Versiglia presented his point of view, upon the request of the superiors, on the distribution of personnel and activities, in view of what the center thought about reinforcing the missionary presence. The bishop was disposed to give greater space to the initiative of the FMA to found works more in keeping with the spirit of the Institute, if they were able to assume the economic situation. Faced with the need to select an animator for each work, he noted that some Sisters did

³³ Sr. Elena Bottini is probably the author of this description of the works. She indicates that Msgr. Versiglia would like to call the work “orphanage” while the Sisters called it “college”. Of the 36 students, 32 were completely cared for by the Mission.

³⁴ Twice when speaking of the Oratory, there is a negative reference: “The principal work should be the Oratory, but for now we have not concluded anything due to the differences of idea between the Superior and the Salesians. Many children are abandoned on the street while their parents are at work; they often try to enter our grounds and come with us, but the superior has instructed the doorkeeper to send them away. When they are able to enter, we share our time with them, but sister superior is not pleased”. Elsewhere, “Here too, we should often have the Oratory, but continued contradictions interfered in the development we expected”. Cf the presentation of the works in China of June 1928, anonymous handwritten, in the AGFMA 13.6501-1-10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

not like being dependent and controlled. Instead of changing personnel right away, he suggested very discretely that another very good missionary be sent who could, after a year in training, assume responsibility.³⁶ In the meeting of General Council on 29 January 1929 his message was considered and the councilors decided to speak with Fr. Ricaldone before deliberating on the matter.³⁷

The long letter from Sr. Palmira Parri to Fr. Rinaldi, which we have already cited, has the value of an accounting at the end of the first six years in China, when some FMA returned and others joined the group. The sowing time was very long, and other threats were arriving. From the letters exchanged by the superior, you can see the various tensions, which accompanied the Salesian community and the tragedy of the two martyrs, including Msgr. Versiglia, during this time of trial and lack of consensus. After his death, his successor, Msgr. Canazei, wrote to the Rector Major in 1931:

“Speaking of the FMA, I would like to make a few observations: a) Presently, with the work they have to do here in Shiu Chow, where all twelve are staying, at least four are too many, and I would prefer that for now, that new ones not be sent, b) Even if I wish to send them to other cities, I do not have the means to build their house, school, etc.; if they want to begin something of their own, with the Institute’s means, I would be very happy. Having the occasion of speaking with the Mother General, reverend Fr. Rinaldi, I would like to share these two observations with her so that she knows how to prepare the next FMA expedition in China.

Ignatius Canazei
Apostolic Vicar of Shiu Chow”.³⁸

Good will was not lacking, yet the limitation of economic resources seemed to inhibit the best distribution of the personnel already present. In other missions as well, this same problem held up development.

5. The formation of “indigenous” religious

The Holy See favored the foundation of local diocesan congregations to facilitate evangelization. The Salesians, too, formed catechists among the young women in view of their choosing religious life.

³⁶ Letter of Msgr. Versiglia, typewritten and signed, Shiu Chow, 27 November 1928, in AGFMA, 13.65 01-1-01.

³⁷ Cf *Minutes of the General Council meeting 1925-1929*, 29 January 1929.

³⁸ Letter of Fr. Ignatius Canazei to Fr. Rinaldi, Shiu Chow, 12 July 1931, N. 10/1931, Type-written, in ASC A 8670281.

While the political situation in China worsened, in 1931 Sr. Parri was asked by Msgr. Ignatius Canazei, the new Apostolic Vicar, to begin a new religious institute for the indigenous women, the Announcers of the Lord - Hin Tchu Wui, for whom he had already written the Constitutions. Msgr. Versiglia had already thought of founding them.³⁹ The aspirants were already ready for several years; their house was in construction. They wanted to begin the Novitiate. Sr. Parri was asked to be the Superior for a few years, being freed from other responsibilities.

Very soon difficulties and differences arouse between her and Msgr. Canazei. In 1933, two young candidates chose to enter among the FMA as aspirants.⁴⁰ This created some tension, the echo of which can be heard in a letter of Msgr. Canazei to Fr. Ricaldone, following the annual report he sent to the Propagation of the Faith for 1932/33. There, he expressed two reasons for lamenting about the Salesians at Don Bosco College and about Sr. Parri; for these reasons, Fr. Ricaldone had to notify him of his disappointment:

“Shiu Chow, 5 November 1933

[...] Regarding the FMA – I had cause for great displeasure this year – in relation to the Association of indigenous Religious...it would take too long to give all the details. I am not saying they are rebels, no! But they certainly are not guided (and they don't want to be!) in the missionary work, were they need to be directed. The Sisters certainly do work with zeal and sacrifice, yet their director, the Vicar, has had many difficulties. If you think it is a good idea, you can read the letter that I felt obliged to send to the Superior (July 1933) and a copy to the Mother General in Turin. Besides this, these observations, which are true, were not published in the newspapers, but simply referred to the competent ecclesiastical authorities, as was my duty: a) that in one school “religious instruction ... was neglected”; and, b) that

³⁹ From the information given by Canazei, he appears to be the Founder, yet the DIP makes the foundation of a lay Diocesan Congregation go back to Msgr. Versiglia in 1928. The Canonical Erection is from Canazei and the approval of the Propagation of the Faith took place in May 1931. With communism taking over, the Sisters were dispersed and some imprisoned. Eight took refuge in Hong Kong, obtaining the Bishop's permission to reopen the Novitiate in 1957, a permission that was ratified by the Propagation of the Faith on 13 December 1957. Cf Mario RASSIGA, *Annunziatrici del Signore*, in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione I*, directed by Guerrino PELLICCIA - Giancarlo ROCCA. Roma, Ed. Paoline 1973, col. 670-671.

⁴⁰ On 24 July 1933, Msgr. Canazei wrote (in the Diary): “Wong Agnes and Tchan Teresa, with their letter of 22 July notified me that they have ceased to be postulants of the Hin Tchu Wui [=Suore Annunziatrici del Signore] and have become aspirants among the FMA”.

for various difficulties (where I really never would have expected to find them) I was forced – with great sorrow – to close the formation house for indigenous religious.

If only, by God's grace the mere exposition of the facts could erase them! Unfortunately, they continue – especially as regards to the association of the indigenous religious and there are still other steps that must be taken (in Rome) and painful decisions for me and for others need to be taken.

Msgr. Canazei".⁴¹

Two years later, the situation was still not peaceful. He had to write a special report for the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, since he was in his fifth year as Bishop. He denounced a certain lack of commitment by the Salesian Superiors towards the Mission. With a long letter dated 26 February 1936, the Vicar defended himself to the Rector Major, who had scolded him for the report that was sent to Rome. Among the other motives for the displeasure regarding the FMA:

"A word regarding the FMA: Please remember that when I speak of the FMA, I am not speaking of all of them together, but only about their Superior (Sr. Parri). All of the difficulties came from the fact that she (helped secretly someone, she should not have done so), due to a project dear to herself, went against a program of the Ordinary (the present Bishop of the local diocese as well as his predecessor, Msgr. Versiglia) a program that had been approved and recommended by the Holy See. That the FMA desire to work for their own Institute is understandable and reasonable. But, as long as they have a work to accomplish, which was entrusted to them, accepted by them, and the mission maintains them, living in the Mission house, they are required to help the Apostolic Vicar to develop the programs established for the good of the Vicariate. Judgment on the opportunity of said program is not part of her responsibility, but belongs to the Superior of the Missions. The Superior, by wishing to do other works outside the place and time established, place obstacles in the way of a very important work of the Vicariate for several years. For this reason, I am now forced, unwillingly and with sorrow in my heart, to look elsewhere for a religious who can help me with the formation of the indigenous religious and with the young catechists of the Vicariate. And to think that this glorious and most important work I wished to entrust precisely to the FMA! Of all this that took place [sic] in 1933, I remained very displeased and I permitted myself to write about it to the Superior General of the FMA, and to present the case to the eminent Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.

⁴¹ A handwritten letter of Fr. Ignatius Canazei to Fr. Ricaldone, Shiu Chow, 5 November 1933, in ASC A 8670239.

For the others, as I have already had occasion to write, I am very happy with the work of the FMA who merit praise for the zeal and patience they use in trying to instruct and educate the youngsters of the Orphanage and the village of Hosai. You scold me in your letter saying: «Unfortunately, in your reports to Rome, you have already complained about the Sisters and the Salesians as well...» Yes, in the five reports sent to Rome, 1931/35, TWICE I had to reprimand our members: once in 1933 in the College St. John Bosco (N.B. I don't think I can say "Salesians") since for the entire year they neglected the teaching of religion in the school. Another time, in 1935, with the FMA Superior (here, too, it seems to me I did not say "the SISTERS") who, in order to carry out her project, interfered with the very important work of the Vicariate. It seems to me that in both of these cases, reprimanding those who deserved it, and letting those responsible know about it, I was only fulfilling my duty as the superior of the Mission".⁴²

We do not know with certainty what Sr. Parri's undertaking was in 1935 that was not shared by the Vicar. It seems that it refers to the institution of the novitiate of the FMA. It is certain that in 1936, Sr. Parri left China and was transferred to far away Egypt, where she passed the rest of her years. The formation of the Announcers of the Lord was entrusted for various years to the Superior of a diocesan congregation present in Canton. In fact, their mission was the catechetical apostolate, helping the missionaries, especially by means of girls' oratories.

At their origin, is the figure of the *kuneong* (virgin catechists), typical of the Chinese missions, committed to integrating the work of the few missionaries in all parts of the mission. In 1927, Fr. Ricaldone had recognized their presences as more numerous than that of the catechists, giving their contribution:

"A great and profitable work is preparing the kuneon[g], who, without becoming Sisters, fulfill the work of the Sisters. There are two or three in each house. Generally, they live apart and according to the conditions suggested in their regulations, as for the Sisters. They care for the girls, some teach school and others visit the families so as to teach the women and to do good. Msgr. has established a type of formation house for the kuneon[g] with the direction being entrusted to the FMA. Things are going pretty well and we hope that the kuneon[g] formed by the Sisters will serve well. In the houses, our missionaries are required to be serious and prudent, in the way they deal with the kuneon[g]. Seek to overcome those few small inconveniences and let's hope that all proceeds well".⁴³

⁴² A long typed letter of 7 pages, by Msgr. I. Canazei to Fr. Ricaldone, Shiu Chow 26 February 1936, in ASC A 8670247.

⁴³ Letter from Fr. Ricaldone to Fr. Rinaldi, 12 November 1927.

Msgr. Versiglia had entrusted their formation to the FMA from the time of his arrival. In 1928, the religious wrote in their report, about their work in the house at Ho-Si, “House of the Kuneon [sic], or Chinese Sisters”:

“This is how these catechists are nominated in China; there are 9 of them. Msgr. Versiglia’s intention is to prepare these young women to be able to conveniently explain the Catechism to the catechumens and to the christians, to teach in the elementary classes, to do needlework and to cook so that they can be of great help when sent to the missions in the outlying districts. When a kuneon [sic] wishes to leave on her own, even if she asks to return, she is no longer accepted. The kuneon [sic] receives a check of 7 dollars monthly; they are completely dependent on the mission. A christian teacher, who is Chinese, was given charge of their mission and teaching. The kuneon [sic] attended only the elementary schools. [...]

N. B. The kuneon [sic] are those Chinese girls who spontaneously want to remain virgins, or they are young women who, having failed with a marriage contract, either because of the death of the spouse, or for changes of idea by parents, or because the spouse wants nothing to do with the obligations of marriage with a young woman he has never met; these girls do not want to go against the Chinese laws that in these cases impose virginity”.⁴⁴

In Thailand, too, the FMA contributed to the formation of the indigenous religious; in fact, Sr. Antoinette Morellato remained for several years with the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Religious, founded by Msgr. Pasotti in 1940. Few years later, Fr. Cavoli founded the Sisters of Charity of Miyazaki in Japan.

Conclusive remarks

The facts we have recalled show, how the missions of the FMA in the Far East were clearly thought out, realized with modest means, responding to the needs, especially in China and in Japan. The economic and political crisis, the vulnerability of women’s conditions, and the standstill caused by World War II did not help the development of the works. It was only later that they took on vigor. Vitality was expressed by the new foundations, linked as they were to painful circumstances, wars and revolutions, which produced the exodus to other nations.

⁴⁴ Cf the presentation of the Works in China, June 1928.

The superiors offered a specific preparation, inspired by the Salesians; nonetheless they were, at the beginning, rather approximate and limited by the pragmatic concept of mission. Certainly, many of the young FMA missionaries stayed many years and were often the ones to promote the expansion. Both in the letters and testimonies in the Sisters' biographies, it could be seen how sacrifices and difficulties were abound. Notwithstanding a strong faith, a rather restricted outlook persisted which caused tensions.

Generally, one can see their efforts to adapt to the environment, notwithstanding the great differences on all levels, an attitude of sympathy and empathy with the people who, especially at the beginning looked with mistrust on the European Religious. The Sisters had thus to gain the trust working among the people. And the experience showed how along with certain cultural gifts, the human and spiritual ones were no less necessary.

It is difficult to outline the typical physiognomy of the Salesian missionary, because though there were some common traits, but specific traits were also present due to the context. It is for good reason that the superiors sometimes had to take time to find the persons adapted. Based on the example of Sr. Parri, in 1928, they realized that in the East it was necessary to choose FMA who were younger, intelligent, capable and flexible and, above all rich in religious virtues and capable of patiently waiting for the fruits; disposed to make sacrifices and continually adapting to difficulties, becoming ever more humble, and zealous in God's love, full of charity towards all; persons with an energetic, detached, and balanced character, not inclined to melancholy.

It is also a fact that they took a certain amount of time to discern the possible initiatives, perhaps they remained a bit too attached to the Italian model of educational apostolate; even if only in desire, and for several years, they did not attain economic autonomy. Some missionaries did leave a long-lasting and fruitful legacy.

Among the problems at the beginning, those related to the formation of the indigenous youth are outstanding: some went to formation houses founded locally; others, according to the province to which they belonged, were sent elsewhere, as for example, the Thais went to India, while those of China and Japan did not. The increase in the number of houses generally determined the birth of autonomous delegations, which could be followed better.

There also emerged various aspects related to the personnel, espe-

cially the animators, in the new missions: often they came from Italy, and were perhaps a bit more mature than the others who were young and inexperienced. Other times, the works began with an FMA who is already a missionary, who brought the richness of her other experiences; at the same time, some models were not adequate to the new context.

In fact, we see alternate hard beginnings with others that are in keeping with the territory. How efficacious were some works organized on the Italian model, a novelty in the territory, as for example the orphanages? Rural areas and city areas determined the need for the work and the possibility of the local population to profit from it. Often, however, in the mission the choice of works was determined, differently from other places.

There is also a spontaneous interest for the Religious Congregations identified as part of the Salesian Family with aspects that are similar and others that are different. At the same time, the young women continued to enter among the FMA, notwithstanding some requirements (for example legitimate birth, good health, good character, certain abilities, a certain way of understanding authority and obedience, etc.).

Not rarely, the will to follow one's native customs, becomes a source of misunderstanding and a block to a proper adaptation to the context. Nevertheless, it brought ideas and new energies in favor of feminine education. The exchange between the missionary priests and Sisters, and those who received the Gospel created the groundwork of a Church in evolution, according to the real possibilities, which needed to be differentiated according to the context.