

ESTABLISHING THE SALESIAN CHARISM IN JAPAN IN THE PROCESS OF FOUNDING THE CARITAS SISTERS OF MIYAZAKI

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Introduction

On 3 February 1939, Fr Vincent Cimatti sent to the Rector Major, Fr Philip Rinaldi some news on the missionary activities of the Salesians in Japan. In it he referred to the first religious professions made in the newly-founded local Congregation of the *Japanese Sisters of Charity*¹. He said,

“On the day of the feast of our saintly father, Don Bosco, we have celebrated the much awaited religious profession of the first novices of the new local Congregation for women, the ‘Japanese Sisters of Charity’. We chose that date for obvious reasons: the originator and formator is a Salesian, Fr Antonio Cavoli; the place of origin of the Congregation is under the care of the Salesians; and the spirit animating its apostolic works is Salesian.”²

With this report, Fr Cimatti made it clear that the Caritas Sisters had truly imbibed the Salesian charismatic identity. In fact, since the Caritas Sisters were born in a Salesian ambient, they had the Salesian

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¹ At the beginning of the juridical process of founding the Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki Fr Cimatti presented the group as “Sisters of Charity”; but following the suggestion of the Propagation of the Faith, in order to distinguish them from other similar institutes, the word “Japanese” was first added, then later the word “Miyazaki”. Cf. Suore della Carità Archivio Storico di Tokyo (SCAST) *Letter Card. Fumasoni Biondi – Vincenzo Cimatti, Rome, 12 aprile 1937*.

² *Letter Cimatti - Ricaldone, Miyazaki, 3 Feb. 1939* in BS LXIII (aprile 1938) p. 115.

inspiration from the beginning. However, this ideal of Fr Cimatti came to be considered only lately.

The 12th General Chapter of the Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki (SCM) held in September 2004, had for its scope the clarification of the charismatic and spiritual identity of the Institute and the renewal of its life and form of government.³ In studying the historical documents of the institute in preparation for the General Chapter, the sisters discovered the eminently Salesian character of their charism. This realization came about particularly when revising the Constitutions and Regulations. In fact, by analyzing the different articles with the help of experts in theology and in Salesianity⁴ they identified a number of elements common to both the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB) and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) alike.

With this research paper, I intend to go briefly through the work of evangelization carried out by the SDB, especially in the field of welfare services, and through the process of writing the first Constitutions of the SCM. I wish to demonstrate how the Salesian charism, lived by Fr Cimatti, Fr Cavoli, and the first sisters of the SCM, had greatly influenced the formation of the charism and the spirit of the Caritas Sisters.

1. The Missionary Work of the Salesians in the Field of Welfare Services

At the time when the Caritas Congregation was born, Japan was experiencing a very serious socio-economic crisis nationwide, as a consequence of the global crisis. Those regions of the country dependent on agriculture and on wood and textile industry, like Miyazaki,

³ Cf. Arippina Fumie KASHIRAJIMA, *Dai 12kai soukaini mukete* [Convocation Letter of General Chapter XII], Tokyo, SCM Generalate 2003, pp.2-3.

⁴ For example, Mario MIDALI, *Aspetti teologici costitutivi dell'identità carismatica di un istituto religioso e delle Suore Caritas. Fondazione delle Suore della Carità di Miyazaki, Ruolo di don Cimatti, di don Cavoli, di suor Maria Osafune e delle prime suore* (Paper presented at the Seminar on the Charism of SCM, Beppu, Japan 2006. Unpublished).

suffered a considerable set-back. Many malnourished children and mothers were dying of famine, especially in the villages. In response to this crisis, the government passed a law in 1929 which took effect only later in 1932. This law directed all institutions to organize welfare services, like homes for old people and infants, hospitals, etc.⁵ Welfare services in Japan at that time were just beginning; so they were poorly organized. In those places where the SDB operated, the work of evangelization was bearing very meager results. The Christian families had very little influence in society, because being poor themselves, they were somewhat despised by the people.⁶

This then was the historical context of the apostolic work of the SDB guided only by the spirit of the “*Da mihi animas*” (Give me souls). Don Bosco was little known in Japan until the Salesians arrived. They encountered a number of difficulties: the scarcity of missionaries, material poverty, religious indifference, prejudice against the Christians, very strong attachment of the people to their traditions and race, difficulties of language, relations with other religions, etc.⁷ This notwithstanding, the Salesians went ahead with their apostolic undertakings unperturbed.

[...] we are ready to suffer any trial, even the lack of basic necessities; but we will neither give up nor diminish our apostolic enthusiasm on behalf of souls [...] there are material sufferings, but the Lord gives us ineffable spiritual consolations too – baptisms, increase of catechumens, greater sympathy and closeness to the mission and to our activities, the need to start new works of charity (orphanages, homes for the old

⁵ Cf. The Social Organization of the Council for Welfare Services in the Prefecture of Miyazaki (ed.), *Commemorative Book on the 50th Anniversary of the Welfare Services in the Prefecture of Miyazaki*, Miyazaki, Miyazaki Minami Press 2003, pp. 91-92.

⁶ Historical Archive of the Propagation of the Faith, *Annual Report of Fr Cimatti to the Propagation of the Faith in 1927*. Prot. 632/1928.

⁷ Cf. Vincenzo CIMATTI, *Un altro anno di missione in Giappone*, BS LVI (novembre 1932) p. 342.

people) and to expand those already started (seminary, Don Bosco school of printing) [...]”⁸

The means used for evangelization were family visits, letter-writing, spreading of good books and newspapers, distribution of religious articles, upgrading of religious instruction, propagation of devotion to Jesus and Mary, organization of different groups, fraternal rapport with other religious institutes.⁹ Faithful to the directives of the Holy Father, the Salesians applied the method of adaptation in evangelizing the people. They tried to understand and assimilate the culture and customs of the Japanese. Their manner of living a simple and joyful life, as well as their Salesian way of carrying out the apostolate gained the sympathy of the people, especially the youth and children.

Many activities were conducted at Miyazaki. But what obtained the best results was the instruction given at family visits, through the efforts of the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul. These visits offered material help and spiritual comfort to people. It served as a first introduction of the Christian faith. Funds came in from the generosity of the poor Christians of Miyazaki.¹⁰ Fr Cimatti tells us of the wonderful effects of this work of charity:

“The good Fr Cavoli knows the effects these family visits have produced in the souls of the pagans, under the auspices of the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul. The Japanese pagan will not be convinced by any beautiful talk or by a series of arguments to present the truth. But he will be touched by a show of affection, by any help to alleviate his sufferings in this life, by the kindness shown to his children. Only then will he begin to approach us, ready to listen, bringing along

⁸ VINCENZO CIMATTI, *Le difficoltà per l'azione missionaria in Giappone*, BS LVI (luglio 1932) p. 213.

⁹ Cf. VINCENZO CIMATTI, *Nel compiersi del II anniversario dei Salesiani in Giappone*, BS LII (giugno 1928) pp. 173-175.

¹⁰ Cf. *Letter Cimatti - Rinaldi, Miyazaki 20.04.1930*, in BS LIV (settembre 1930) 277-278.

also his children.... The work begins by assisting the poor and abandoned children. For the time being we entrust these children to the care of good Christian families (since we do not as yet have orphanages and homes in the locality). With the support of generous friends in the Japanese missions, all this will surely bear fruits. In the same way, the care for the old people will fill your hearts with hope for the future.”¹¹

In Japan, the work of the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul was begun in 1915, first at Yokohama and then at Nagasaki and Tokyo. The Conference at Miyazaki, however, was different from many others, as it was distinctly missionary in nature. Fr Cavoli emphasizes this:

“I believe that there are only a few Conferences of St. Vincent like ours which offer great and wonderful opportunities for doing good. Our presence is distinctly missionary. We evangelize, baptize, present religion in terms of charitable services, despite the scarcity of material resources.”¹²

The Hospice of Miyazaki, born of the activity of the Conference of St. Vincent, was the first institution to house the poor and sick elderly people in the Prefecture of Miyazaki. It was inaugurated on 19 December 1932 and recognized by the Prefect on 26 April 1934. A new building for the orphanage was added on 29 September 1934. Since the beginning, the work (including the construction of the building and the maintenance of the personnel) depended on foreign aid, particularly from Italy. At that time, activities such as welfare services were little appreciated in the Prefecture. The Hospice was a pioneering work that contributed much to the development of welfare services in the Prefecture of Miyazaki. The Hospice also served as the place where the Salesian spirit was practiced in a Japanese manner.

¹¹ *Letter Cimatti - Rinaldi, Miyazaki, 16 July 1930*, in BS LIV (ottobre 1930) 307.

¹² Antonio CAVOLI, *La Conferenza missionaria femminile della B. Imelda Lambertini a Miyazaki*, Bologna, Tipografia Luigi Parma 1934, p.132.

By affirming “Charity as the way to faith”, article 2 of the Constitutions of the SCM re-echoes the convictions of both Fr Cavoli and Fr Cimatti. It came from their apostolic experiences in Japan and from the directives Don Bosco and Fr Rinaldi gave to the first missionaries.

“The program of charity that we intend to carry out the Salesian way is varied, yet always according to the guidelines that Don Bosco gave to his missionaries: ‘Take care especially of the sick, the children, the old people and the poor, and you will merit the blessings of God and the goodwill of the people’”¹³.

“Dearest sons, you go to Japan. Do not expect to receive a warm welcome nor an immediate success similar to missionaries in other mission lands where people easily respond. You are going to a very different country, having a more advanced civilization. If you have studied its history, you would have realized that Japan has nothing to learn from the West either in the literary or in the scientific field. Does that mean that you have nothing new to offer to Japan? You possess something that Japan does not have and is waiting to receive from you: charity. Japan does not have charity because it has not known the true God yet. Therefore, let your apostolate be proportionate to the charity of Christ so that it may radiate from you to the Japanese people”¹⁴.

Furthermore, Fr Cavoli spells out the reason for choosing the name “*Caritas*” for the new Congregation: that the name may always recall the teaching of Fr Rinaldi to the first Salesian missionaries to Japan. Also, the institution itself of the Caritas Sisters serves as a lasting memorial to the dimension of “charity” envisioned by the Salesian charism.

¹³ Vincenzo CIMATTI, *Giappone. Nel programma di Don Bosco*, BS LXII (giugno 1938) 132.

¹⁴ Marco BUONGIOVANNI - Giorgio COLAJACOMO (a cura di), *Don Bosco nel mondo*, Vol. II, Torino, Industrie Grafiche Mariogros 1988, pp. 386-387.

2. The Process of Writing the First Constitutions of the SCM

The ideals of Fr Cimatti and of Fr Cavoli with regard to the Caritas Sisters were expressed in the Constitutions of the SCM. Hence it is important to see how this document was formulated and which elements of the Salesian spirit were highlighted therein.

Fr Cavoli formed this group of young ladies, called the "Daughters of Charity" (the future Caritas Sisters), in order to run the Hospice of Miyazaki. He drew up some simple Regulations¹⁵ to guide them. With the help of Fr Cimatti and the Salesians, he gave these young Japanese ladies a Salesian formation. At that time what he had in mind for them was quite different from what Fr Cimatti wanted them to be in the future.¹⁶

Therefore, when Fr Cavoli started to write the Constitutions, he had in mind these ladies living the experience of Christian charity according to the Regulations he had given them. He defined exactly the scope of this new group: the practice of charity towards one's neighbor.

The process of writing the first Constitutions of the SCM actually began in 1937 when Fr Cavoli accepted the suggestion of Fr Cimatti to found a new Congregation of local women at Miyazaki. This task meant for him much study and hard work. At that time every religious institute, faithful to the teachings of the Church, had to

¹⁵ Unfortunately these Regulations got lost, but we have some hints of them in the Chronicles of the Hospice of Miyazaki, where on 18 March 1933, Fr Cavoli gave some rules to the Daughters of Charity. Cf. SCAST, *Kyugoin Nisshi* [*Chronicles of the Hospice of Miyazaki from 1933 to 1937*], p. 7.

¹⁶ Fr Cimatti was dreaming of this group as a religious institute in the future; on the other hand, Fr Cavoli preferred the group to remain as a Conference of St. Vincent only. Cf. Cimatti Museum of Tokyo (CMT) S.39-A, *La Cronaca 1925-1940* (Memoirs of Vincenzo Cimatti compiled by Alfonso Crevaore) 16-17 luglio 1933, p. 33. On this matter, Fr Cimatti says, "At the Hospice I preach the triduum to prepare the aspirants for religious life; there will be a testing period of one year and then they will have to decide." Cf. also A. CAVOLI, *La Conferenza missionaria femminile*, pp. 11-29.

find a way of adapting itself to the missions. To start such a journey was indeed very difficult. In fact, Msgr. Marella, the Apostolic Delegate to Japan, pointed this out by saying:

“[...] Though having a good number of local members the well-deserving institutes for women already existing, will never be capable of adapting their customs and their rules to the demands of Japan, particularly with regard to welfare services. Hence it is opportune to encourage the founding of new institutes of active life exclusively for the Japanese. In fact, two local Congregations already exist: the ‘Sisters of the Visitation’ (*Homon-Doteikai*) founded by Msgr. Breton, and the ‘Daughters of the Sacred Heart’ (*Seish aishkai*) founded by Mother Teresa who herself is a Sister of the Holy Spirit of Steyl. These two institutes are visibly increasing in number and in activity”¹⁷.

The manuscripts of Fr Cavoli, preserved in the historical archive of the SCM, reveal his attempt to adapt the Constitutions to the situation of the country and to the requirements of religious life. In working out the Constitutions, Fr Cavoli consulted the Constitutions of some other institutes already present in Japan¹⁸, namely, the “Sisters of St. Maur” (Institute of the Sisters of the Child Jesus)¹⁹, the “Institute of the

¹⁷ SCAST, *Letter (copy) Msgr. Paolo Marella – Card. Fumasoni Biondi, Tokyo, 22 febbraio 1937.*

¹⁸ Cf. SCAST, Antonio CAVOLI, *Quaderno 5*, s.d. [Miyazaki]. This copybook cites some notes and reflections which Fr Cavoli used in writing the first Constitutions.

¹⁹ The “Sisters of St. Maur” arrived in Japan already in 1972. They worked to educate abandoned children and young girls, made great progress and were invited to the Diocese of Fukuoka by Msgr. Breton in 1935. However, their foundations were destroyed during the World War. Cf. Tuneko SHIMADA, *Sisters of St. Maur in Encyclopedia of the History of Christianity in Japan*, Tokyo, Kyobunkan 1987, p. 599.

Sisters of St. Anne”²⁰, the “Franciscan Missionaries of Mary”²¹, and of course, the SDB and the FMA. These texts helped him to learn more about religious life for women.

Offering him support was Msgr. Alberto Breton, MEP, Bishop of Fukuoka and founder of the “Sisters of the Visitation of Mary”, the first local congregation of women religious in Japan; it was founded some years before the SCM.²² Close to this Institute was the first novitiate of the SCM. Fr Cavoli and Fr Cimatti often received useful suggestions from this Congregation. And so, after much hard work, study and prayer on 31 January 1938 (the 50th anniversary of the death of Don Bosco),²³ Fr Cavoli finally presented to Msgr. Cimatti (his Superior and the Prefect of the Independent Missions of Miyazaki) the first draft of the Constitutions²⁴, entitled “The Constitutions of the

²⁰ The “Institute of the Sisters of St. Anne” started its apostolate in 1934 by giving welfare services through education and medical care at Fukuoka upon the request of Msgr. Breton. But the strong movement to send away foreigners during the World War forced the Institute to transfer to Canada. Cf. [Anonimo] *Institute of St. Anne* in ID, p. 737.

²¹ The first five members of the “Franciscan Missionaries of Mary” came to Kumamoto, Japan, in 1898 upon the request of Fr Corre Jean-Marie, MEP, in order to take care of lepers. In 1934 some children of these lepers were entrusted to the Hospice of Miyazaki. Cf. Syukuko OGAKI, *Franciscan Missionaries of Mary* in ID, p. 1339.

²² The “Institute of the Sisters of the Visitation” was founded by Fr Albert Breton, MEP, with four Japanese women members in 1925. They worked mainly in the field of education and medical services. Cf. Wakako SEKI, *The Sisters of the Visitation* in ID, p. 796.

²³ [According to the testimony of some of the Sisters], “Invoking the help of the Holy Spirit, Fr Antonio began to note down in his copybooks ideas that came to him little by little. He applied himself to work during the day and even at night, while going to and coming from the sacristy and the church. He prayed, took down notes, put these notes in order. He studied Canon Law for almost two years, consulted the SDB Constitutions, and completed the final draft”: Misae TANIGUCHI, *Come girasoli: Don Antonio Cavoli e la congregazione Caritas di Miyazaki*, Torino, LDC 1998, p. 82.

²⁴ “Announces as reason for common joy the fact that on that morning, Fr Cavoli wanted to present to him the new and completed rules of the newly-born

Japanese Caritas Sisters”. Fr Cimatti examined them carefully and then gave them back to him on 8 February, the date commemorating the arrival of the first missionaries to Japan. Fr Cimatti made some inclusions and proposals for modification²⁵ from the point of view of universal law.

There were also two other type-written drafts of the Constitutions without any date or place of composition (most probably at Miyazaki), and a complete text in Latin. The said Constitutions obtained the official approval of the Propagation of Faith on 1 April 1949.

In his autobiography, Fr Cavoli records how he succeeded in composing the first part of the Constitutions.

“I began this undertaking by wondering what I must do to found and guide a congregation of sisters. Practically I know nothing about it and do not even dare to think about it. To begin with, I know that any religious congregation must have its own scope, its own Constitutions and Regulations that will spell out its religious spirit and specific field of work. With regard to religious spirit – more or less, this is common to all congregations, that is, to strive after spiritual perfection by observing the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in imitation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then with regard to the specific scope of the congregation, it is after all no other than the happy experience of the work already begun ten years ago, which started very modestly but now has grown big and still continues to develop ever more: charity as the way to faith. Here, therefore, is Article 2 of the Constitutions: ‘The special goal of the Congregation is to help spread the Catholic faith among the pagans, in and outside the country, through works of charity.’ Article 3: ‘The works of charity,

local Congregation. The Holy See and the Holy Father had asked for such a foundation, and we rejoice at being at the vanguard to welcome such wish of the Holy Father. From heaven Don Bosco will certainly rejoice too and bless it”: CMT, *Chronicles of the House of Miyazaki*, 31 Jan. 1938, p. 38/1.

²⁵ SCAST, *Letter V. Cimatti – A. Cavoli*, Miyazaki, 2 Feb. 1938.

characteristic of this Society, are the visits to the homes of the poor and the sick.' Article 4: 'Furthermore, the Society promotes all kinds of works of mercy' Basing on these fundamental elements, the Constitutions are expanded into a total of 335 articles. I worked hard for almost two years in order to organize the contents so that everything moves toward one and the same end, eliminating any contradiction, deficiency or superficiality, and always in agreement with the mandatory prescriptions of the Code of Canon Law"²⁶.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Salesian charism was lived and inculcated by the Caritas Sisters. The founders communicated the Salesian charism and spirit with their own life, putting emphasis above all on the mission of charity as described in the Constitutions. In fact, we can find there so many familiar elements of the Salesian spirit, namely:

- method motivated by pastoral charity and by the preventive system (art. 7, 11, 12, 14)
- family spirit (art. 29, 30)
- work and temperance (art. 67)
- Eucharistic and Marian piety (art. 74).

But there are also distinct elements that characterize the specific mission of the Caritas Sisters. These are:

- lively missionary drive to reach out to other nations (art. 2)
- concern for family apostolate (art. 3, 8, 10)
- and in a special way, the contemplation of the mystery of the Heart of Christ as the living fountain of his merciful and saving love (art. 16, 18, 72, 73, 197²⁷).

²⁶ ANTONIO CAVOLI, *Dall'Italia al Giappone. Autobiografia di un missionario*, Rimini, Tipografia Grattoni 1954, p. 97-98.

²⁷ Regarding article 197, Fr Cimatti says, "One article of the Constitutions of the Society of Japanese Caritas Sisters – the best fruit given by the 'Sacred Heart

Fr Egidio Vigano, in the official document recognizing the Institute as a member of the Salesian Family, confirmed this distinct spirit of the SCM.²⁸ He affirmed, "This will help all to deepen the Salesian pastoral charity."²⁹

The religious institutes founded by Salesians in various parts of the world, which propagate the spirit of Don Bosco are a continual witness to the vitality of the Salesian Congregation. The Caritas Sisters too, as one of these, continue to establish the Salesian charism wherever the Lord would send them to work.

Hospice' at Miyazaki, which is destined to multiply itself in many similar works of mercy wherever Providence deigns to make it expand – does prescribe that on the feast of the Sacred Heart, every House of the Society will read publicly the annual report of the work done by the whole Society. This will serve as a solemn act of public worship to the most Sacred Heart of Jesus. In this holy Name and for the coming of his Kingdom does every Sister fulfill her tasks. This homage to the most Sacred Heart is an act of humility by which every Sister declares, "*Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*" ("Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your Name give glory" Ps. 113:1). It is to acknowledge devoutly the desire of the Sacred Heart to help and save all mankind. It is an act of fraternal charity that unites all the sisters of the Society with gentle bonds in the Divine Heart of Jesus, and it is a holy invitation to increase the zeal and effort in order to bring salvation to as many souls as possible. It is my pleasure to cite here the statistics from the first report on the Congregation's achievements at the Hospice from the feast of the Sacred Heart last year up to the present." Vincenzo CIMATTI, *Giappone. Frutti preziosi*, BS LXIII (novembre 1939) 326-327.

²⁸ Antonio CAVOLI, *From Italy to Japan*, pp. 119-120.

²⁹ Fr Egidio Vigano's official letter recognizing the Caritas Sisters as members of the Salesian Family, addressed to Sr Teresia Iwanaga Matyuo, Superior General of the SCM, Rome, 31 Jan. 1986.