

UNITY OF LIFE IN FR VINCENT CIMATTI, FOUNDER OF THE CARITAS SISTERS OF MIYAZAKI

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Introduction

In recent years our Congregation of the Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki, especially the Province of Korea, experiences a fresh interest in the origins of our charism. The sisters talk about the primary importance of prayer and the secondary value of daily work. Even the ordinary Christians of today want to see the religious sisters pray more. People seem to appreciate more the work of the religious who dedicate time to prayer. On account of this we tend to give in to this expectation and to withdraw ourselves in order to pray.

In reality this is not our charism. What do we do about it? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to go back to the origins of our charism. Having read the letters written from Japan by Fr Vincent Cimatti, our co-founder¹, I'm of the opinion that in these letters we can find a satisfactory answer to the questions about our original charism.

1. The Ideals of Fr Cimatti

This paper has been prepared in the context of the theme of the EAO history seminar, the implantation of the Salesian charism in East Asia. We shall look at the personality of Fr Cimatti, considered an icon with reference to the Salesian charism and its establishment

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¹ According to our Constitutions Fr Cimatti is our co-founder. Further studies on the founder are being done.

in this part of Asia. We will draw light from his ideals and life lived with consistency and holiness. The question we have at hand finds convincing responses in him by way of teachings and concrete examples.

Fr Cimatti was a true Salesian. He wanted to attain holiness through the accomplishment of the mission assigned to him, namely, bringing the love of God to the young, especially the poorest.² This ideal is authentically Salesian. He naturally communicated to us, the Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki, this ideal by his example. For him work is prayer, as Don Bosco used to say. During his lifetime in Japan, Fr Cimatti gradually fulfilled this ideal.

2. The Challenges of Work

Fr Cimatti had much work since the start of his religious life. His life in Japan, except for his first assignment³, was an experience of ever-increasing amounts of work. This is very much evident in the period from 1928 to 1949⁴. Having much to do was for him a challenge that made him enthusiastic. We shall have a brief overview of his career in order to understand his dynamic activity.

From 1 February 1927 till 1929 he served as parish priest at Miyazaki. At the same time, from 1 January 1928⁵ to 1937, he was the Superior of the Salesians in Japan. From 1930 to 1932 he was appointed superior of the Independent Missions, the Superior of the Salesian Vice-Province, the rector and professor of the studentate. Over and above all these, he was also in charge of the religious services at Tano. In 1932 Fr Cimatti opened the hospice for orphans and old

² Cf. *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco. A Guide to the Salesian Constitutions*, Madras, Salesian Institute of Graphic Arts 1987, p. 90.

³ Fr Cimatti arrived in Japan on 8 February 1926.

⁴ In this year he was 70 years old.

⁵ In the early years all the 9 Salesians belonged to the Province of China; on 1 January 1928 the houses of Japan became independent and Fr Cimatti was appointed Superior.

people. In 1933-1934 he opened a presence at Tokyo, as well as the Little Seminary of Miyazaki.

From 1935 to 1940, he was the Prefect Apostolic of Miyazaki. In 1937, together with Fr Cavoli, he founded the Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki. From 1938 to 1949 he served as the Salesian Provincial. From 1942 to 1947 there was the war and the work of reconstruction.

As it is evident, he shouldered a tremendous amount of work. That was not all. All through those years he assumed further responsibilities. First of all, he followed up with fatherly care the confreres of all the communities. He sent them letters frequently, he visited them even travelling two consecutive nights by train. He travelled to Manchuria and Korea. He gathered them every month for spiritual recollection.

Secondly, every month he unfailingly sent a personal report to the Rector Major and an account of the situation in the missions. His letters are a masterpiece of sincerity, affection and obedience to the Superiors, of concern for the good of the confreres and the mission work. He also sent letters to friends, benefactors, past pupils, etc. Given below is a table showing a year-wise distribution of his letters. Of a total of 6,107 letters written by him 62.7% (3,829) were written during the period 1926-1949.

Year	Letters	Year	Letters	Year	Letters	Year	Letters
1888-1925	135	1936	210	1947	127	1958	223
1926	109	1937	198	1948	143	1959	199
1927	88	1938	224	1949	225	1960	227
1928	108	1939	232	1950	72	1961	196
1929	105	1940	256	1951	75	1962	152
1930	164	1941	186	1952	102	1963	139
1931	193	1942	85	1953	116	1964	69
1932	160	1943	103	1954	130	1965	10
1933	157	1944	110	1955	93	Total: 6107 1926-1949: 3829 62.7%	
1934	161	1945	129	1956	167		
1935	235	1946	121	1957	173		

Thirdly, he also organized musical concerts. He himself composed the music. We have a documentation of about 950 musical compositions by him. How was he able to do all these things?

3. The Response: Industriousness

One word stands out in Fr Cimatti's correspondence. This very important and significant word is "industriousness", which appears very often in his letters and as such calls for further reflection.

3.1. *Originating from Don Bosco*

First of all, the thoughts of Fr Cimatti on industriousness were derived from the teachings of Don Bosco. He conveyed this idea to a cleric by saying, "If for St. Benedict it was '*ora et labora*' (work and prayer), for Don Bosco it was 'work is prayer'."⁶ Thus also for Salesians work is prayer.

Without attempting to elaborate the ideas of Don Bosco on this matter, it suffices to recall some of the short reminders Fr Cimatti used to give to confreres. Once he explained it this way:

"Keep this idea in mind. Stop having fantasies. Life is practical. Here are three words to remember and practice:

"Prayer (Jesus prays for us).

"Action (Salesian work done with Jesus, for Jesus and in Jesus is prayer. The more you work in this way, the more you pray. Duty! Duty! Duty! Do it to save souls).

"Sacrifice (Sacrifice in working, in living community life, in the concerns of daily life, in carrying our daily crosses)."⁷

According to Fr Cimatti, when a Salesian has done his work with, for, in Jesus, he has already prayed. In reality, this expression

⁶ No. 2020, 4 March 1938, to the cleric Luigi Dal Fior, a Salesian missionary in Japan. The source of Cimatti's letters cited here is the Collection published on the internet by the "Salesian Digital Library" (<http://sdl.sdb.org/gsd/cgi-bin/library>). The collection contains a transcription of the letters of Cimatti. The letters are identified by the serial no. and date.

⁷ No. 4639, 17 Sept. 1956 ca., to Sr Angiolina Barone, FMA Directress in Japan.

had already appeared in his letters from 1925⁸ up until 1953. From 1954 onwards he often used this expression, "Always work with Him, for Him and in Him".⁹ He also would say, "Always work hard with the Lord and for the Lord".¹⁰

As he worked industriously without limit, he always prayed. His explanations will make us understand better the close relationship between work and prayer. We shall cite some examples. Speaking about industriousness and prayer, he says,

"For you: as usual, cheerfulness, industriousness combined with simplicity; drive away useless worry and always be grounded in prayer."¹¹

"Be industrious in charity and in prayer."¹²

"Be cheerful. Let us always work, dear Fr Francis, in charity and in prayer. I don't have anything new to say."¹³

"Work hard for souls! Do it with prayer, sacrifice, example, words, with Him alone, for Him alone and in Him alone."¹⁴

"Hard work united to prayer and vice-versa."¹⁵

⁸ No. 93, 1 Nov. 1925, to the cleric Antonio Giordano, past-pupil of Valsalice: "Do what you can and cheerfully, and do it in a way that your work be done for the Lord (forget a little about glory), for the young and to make reparation."; No. 107, 15 Dec. 1925, to the clerics, past-pupils of Valsalice, "Let us love one another in Him and for Him, and with Him let us work."

⁹ No. 4304, 24 June 1954, to Fr Giulio Manganelli, Salesian missionary to Japan; Cf. No. 5259, 18 Dec. 1959, to Fr Pietro Zerbino, editor of the Salesian Bulletin: "Courage, my dear good Pietro. Let us work for Him and in Him and for Him [sic.], with Mary the Immaculate Help, our teacher".

¹⁰ No. 4375, 12 Jan. 1955, to Sr Giuseppina Gazzada, FMA Directress.

¹¹ No. 4910, 8 April 1958, to Fr Attilio Klinger, Salesian missionary to Japan.

¹² No. 4988, 9 Aug. 1958, to Fr Felice Bovio, Salesian missionary to Japan.

¹³ No. 5206, 22 Aug. 1959, to Fr Francesco Rastello, past-pupil of Valsalice and benefactor.

¹⁴ No. 4411. 17 March 1955, to Fr Giulio Manganelli, Salesian missionary to Japan.

¹⁵ No. 4872, 30 Jan. 1958, to F. Franco Acerbi, Salesian missionary to Japan.

“Be cheerful. Work (souls! souls! always united to God and to the souls [in purgatory] in prayer and in charity).”¹⁶

“Always work with charity for the good of souls, and be always sustained by prayer.”¹⁷

“Work, and union with God and with the souls (as many as the Lord entrusts to you) in charity and in prayer.”¹⁸

At other times, he pauses to dwell on the intense relationship between work and prayer:

“By increasing work, you increase the intensity of prayer.”¹⁹

“The intense drive for improving the practices of piety continues; now I insist on praying before and after work, and on the meditation.”²⁰

“Try to keep calm, work in an orderly fashion and more so with prayer and faith.”²¹

“Work with calmness, faith, prayer and good example; the results will be guaranteed.”²²

Finally, we find a synthesis that is very useful for formation:

“When Misao comes treat him as a brother; teach and motivate him to work and piety with word and example (for instance, before beginning work say a prayer; if he helps you

¹⁶ No. 5762, 8 June 1962, to *Fr Giuseppe Grigoletto*, past-pupil of Valsalice.

¹⁷ No. 5837, 24 Dec. 1962, to *Sr Elisabetta Hirate*, studying in Italy.

¹⁸ No. 5917, 11 April 1963, to *Fr Antonio Colussi*, already a Salesian missionary to Japan.

¹⁹ No. 329, 13 Feb. 1928, to *the Salesians and Missionaries in Japan*.

²⁰ No. 894, 9 Feb. 1932, to *Fr Pietro Ricaldone*, Vicar of the Rector Major of the Salesians.

²¹ No. 3740, 11 April 1949, to *Fr Giuseppe Figura*, Salesian missionary to Japan.

²² No. 5128, 5 April 1959, to *Fr Giulio Manganelli*, Salesian missionary to Japan.

in the kitchen say with him a few decades of the rosary during the work).”²³

3.2. *In the Spirit of St. Francis de Sales and Don Bosco*

Secondly, he encouraged the confreres to work in the spirit of St. Francis de Sales and of St. John Bosco:

“Especially during this month, let us try to work intensely in the spirit of St. Francis de Sales and of Don Bosco.”²⁴

“Let us work with one accord in order to realize in ourselves and in the souls entrusted to our care the educative system of Don Bosco and his traditions.”²⁵

“Let us work with faith in the name of Don Bosco without worrying about the results.”²⁶

“I wish you could work like Don Bosco, and like him attract good vocations.”²⁷

3.3. *Correspondence to the Fulfilment of One’s Duties*

Thirdly, industriousness corresponds to the fulfilment of one’s daily duties. For him this topic was very important. For this reason one often finds in his letters the verb: “work, work, work”, or the adjective “industrious” used with insistence.

²³ No. 291, 26 Oct. 1927, to *Alfonso Merlino*, Salesian layman, resident of Nakatsu.

²⁴ No. 2668, 7 Jan. 1941, to the *Salesian missionaries of the Province of St. Francis Xavier*.

²⁵ No. 758, 11 June 1931, at the conclusion of the visit to the *Salesian work at Nakatsu*.

²⁶ No. 1135, 11 July 1933, to *Fr Giorgio Serie*, Councillor General for the Oratories.

²⁷ No. 3085, 5 April 1944, to the cleric *Stefano Dell’Angela*, Salesian missionary to Japan.

3.4. *Characteristics*

Fourthly, when speaking of industriousness, he specifies some of its characteristics:

“Work with faith, self-sacrificing love and cheerfulness.”²⁸

“Always work, work, work, with right intention.”²⁹

“Work with calmness, without worrying, with perseverance.”³⁰

“Allow me to repeat it (it is the mind of Don Bosco): ‘Will they allow us to work for 10? Then it is our duty to work for 10. Will they allow us to work for only one? Then let us do the little they allow us; but let us carry out the various tasks entrusted to us.’”³¹

“Always work: 1. in obedience, 2. as per schedule, 3. never at night [...]”³²

“To be industrious is to do one’s duty seasoned with sacrifice.”³³

²⁸ No. 61, ? Nov. 1924, *to the cleric Abele Joyeusaz*, past-pupil of Valsalice.

²⁹ No. 105, 24 Dec. 1925, *to the cleric Giovanni Alberti*, past-pupil of Valsalice.

³⁰ No. 449, 18 March 1929, *visit to the Salesians at Nakatsu*, 15-18 March 1929.

³¹ No. 3014, 16 Aug. 1943, *to the confreres of the Salesian Province of St. Francis Xavier*.

³² No. 299, 16 Nov. 1927, *to the cleric Giuseppe Grigoletto*, past-pupil of Valsalice; Cf. No. 329, 13 Feb. 1928, *to the Salesians and missionaries of Japan*: “‘Work, but only according to your capacity – take care of your health’ (Don Bosco). Therefore, a) Do not work at night. b) Work in obedience and methodically”; Cf. No. 217, 23 Dec. 1926, *to the cleric Lorenzo Chiabotto*, past-pupil of Valsalice: “If you want a fraternal advice to become a good Salesian priest, a) Live in union with God. b) Work as required by obedience”.

³³ No. 4872, 30 Jan. 1958, *to Fr Franco Acerbi*, Salesian missionary to Japan; Cf. No. 5721, 15 March 1962, *to Fr Alfonso Crevacore*, new Rector of the studentate of Chofu: “Industriousness means heartily doing your daily duties, with God, for God and in God.”

The advice of Fr Cimatti on work is very concrete and systematic. He not only insisted on working, but also on doing it methodically. We can indeed affirm that he was industrious and that he worked in a way that made him a saint.

3.5. *Spiritual Dimension*

Finally, he spoke not only of physical or material work, but also of spiritual work:

“Work in order to become holier.”³⁴

“Courage, therefore! Work with joy, with goodwill to become truly holy.”³⁵

“Let us not forget to work spiritually for the good of souls and for all those entrusted to our care.”³⁶

“Industriousness means doing your daily duties, and ‘*nulla dies sine linea*’ (not a day without a line) in your spiritual endeavors.”³⁷

“Continue with your spiritual undertakings, a little step daily. ‘Walk under the watchful eyes of God and look ahead to where you are going. God is pleased to see you move forward in little steps. He will keep pace with you and will not leave you behind’ (St. Francis of Sales).”³⁸

For Fr Cimatti in this way work became prayer.

³⁴ No. 3260, 12 Nov. 1945, to cleric Mario Antolini, Salesian missionary to Japan.

³⁵ No. 5134, 7 April 1959 ca., to Sr Angiolina Barone, FMA Directress in Japan.

³⁶ No. 3023, 16 Aug. 1943, to the confreres of the Salesian Province of St. Francis Xavier.

³⁷ No. 4678, 23 Dec. 1956, to the Cleric Amedeo Illera, student of theology at Crocetta.

³⁸ No. 5416, 24 July 1960, to Fr Carmelo Simoncelli, Salesian missionary to Japan.

Conclusion

It may be drawn from the above discussion that Fr Cimatti did succeed in imbibing the intuitions of St. John Bosco and living them in his own life faithfully and consistently. He was able besides to give it expression in the particular context of Asia and make a singular contribution to expanding the Salesian charism in Japan through the life and mission of the Congregation of the Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki, co-founded by him. It may be affirmed that his spiritual maturity undoubtedly found fulfilment in the Asian context of which our congregation is but an expression.

Taking a close look at the life and teachings of Fr Cimatti we are able to spell out how he incarnated the Salesian ideal in himself and passed it on to the Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki. For him the fount of the unity of life and the essence of the Salesian charism, the “*Damihim animas, coetera tolle*” of Don Bosco – apostolic zeal and pursuit of holiness – found expression in work, sanctified work, work that is prayer, work combined with prayer. Moreover, the shining example of this great Salesian invites us to a deeper reflection and understanding of the charism he enthusiastically lived, and hopefully for all of us, a more profitable and convinced life-application will follow with the help of our own spiritual guides.