

THE INITIUM OF THE SALESIAN PRESENCE IN THAILAND

*Enrico Danieli SDB**

1. Thailand at the arrival of the Salesians (1850–1945)

1.1. *Historical and social background*

Thailand: this land of the white elephant and the yellow robes and splendid Pagoda was known to the Western people as “The Kingdom of Siam”, but the people living here always called themselves Thais. The Thais have a long history, going back many thousand years, but the present Thai Kingdom started nearly in 1260 at Sukhothai¹ in the North of Thailand.

In 1350, after they had pushed the Khmers out of the territory, they founded the second Capital at Ayuthaya, about 80 km upstream the Chao Phraya River.² Then the Thai Kingdom expanded from Laos to Malaysia and from Cambodia to East Burma and became powerful and rich, with 16 Principalities under its rule. But after 417 years the Burmese captured and destroyed Ayuthaya and the Kingdom of Siam in 1767. After only two years the great King Taaksin reorganized the Country and in 1782 the new capital Bangkok was founded. The present Dynasty started with the New Capital Bangkok. The present King Phumiphon³ was born on the 5th of December 1927 the very year the Salesians arrived in Siam.

Meanwhile in 1810, Great Britain started to expand in Malaysia and then in Burma. Then France started to expand in Indochina and both became a threat to the Kingdom of Siam from the West and the East. The King Rama IV (1851 - 1868) started to open the Kingdom to the Western technologies. He was really scared of the two European powers at the western and eastern borders. Then the wise Kings Rama the V (1868 - 1910) and Rama VI (1911 - 1924) continued to modernize the Country.

* Fr. Enrico Danieli is a Salesian missionary in Thailand. He resides at the Salesian Novitiate in Sampran, Thailand.

¹ The first Thai capital, one of the group that formed the Lanna Kingdom.

² The all Thai river that flows from the North to the Gulf of Siam.

³ Rama IX, he is reigning since 1946.

The Kingdom did not fall prey of any Western Power. But the Kingdom still lost territories to Great Britain and to France.

After the First World War, Socialism was also spreading among the Thai people. In 1932, a group of socialist politicians obtained the Constitution from the King. But in 1934, because of the social instability a military Government took over. Later, it joined with Italy, Japan and Germany. In 1939, the Prime Minister Luang Phibun Songkhram became a Nationalist Dictator. He changed the name of the Country to Thailand and he took the Country to war against France in Indochina first (1941), to recapture the lost territories and then along with the Japanese against the Allies (1942 - 45). At the end the Country lost everything.

When the Government went to war against France, the Catholics were suspected to be related with the French and became target of distrust and limitations by fanatic groups. These groups waged a real persecution against the Catholics with the support of the Government (December 1940 - 1944).

1.2. *Religious background*

The Thais became Buddhist since 2,000 years. When they started the Thai Kingdom they shifted to the Small Vehicle of strict observance. Buddhist became a way of life for the Thais. The Pagodas has been the centre of the social life of every village and town. The Thai culture is a Buddhist culture.

Nowadays, the Thais are still 92% Buddhist. The Thais respect other Religions, but are jealous of their Buddhist culture and they do not convert easily. The Catholics are nearly 290,000 less than 0.5% of the population (62 m).

1.3. *The Catholic Mission in Thailand*

In the 16th Century, some Portuguese Missionaries from Goa and Malacca started to preach the Christian Religion in the Kingdom of Siam and opened some churches in Ayuthaya and Phuket Island. In 1660, the Missionaries of the newly established Society of the M.E.P., were given the Mission work in Indochina. In 1668, the Holy See also erected the Vicariate of Siam and entrusted it the Society of the M.E.P.

However, after a promising start, the French missionaries, suffered the first severe persecution, that brought many limitations to the missionary work for more than one century. In the year 1811, in the Vicariate of Siam there were only 3,000 Catholics. After this time the Missionaries started to work with the minorities: the Chinese, the Vietnamese and the Laotians: the Mission made better progress. In 1841, the Vicariate of Malacca (or of West Siam) was established.

Since 1850, the Catholics enjoyed a period of peace, freedom and growth all over the Country. In 1899, the new Vicariate of Laos was established in the North East of Siam. It was also in this period that the Missionaries dedicated themselves to the field of education and health care, which the Thais appreciated very much.

1.4. Events leading to the Salesian presence

The decisive factor that opened the way to other Congregations was the Encyclical Letter “Maximum illud” issued in 1919, which gave a new drive to the missionary work. At the same time in 1922 the M.E.P. had only 20 French Priests and 30 indigenous Priests to take care of the Vicariates of Bangkok and Laos which together had a population of about 30,000 Catholics. The Monfortian Brothers,⁴ the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres Sisters, the indigenous Nuns “Lovers of the Cross” and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart were precious collaborators for the schools, but there were no other Congregations of Priests to take part in the Pastoral Ministry.

The first Apostolic Delegate to visit the Kingdom of Siam in 1923 Msgr. Leocroart, suggested to Msgr. René Perros to study the possibility to divide the Vicariate. After a while, in order to comply with the new missionary drive of the Church, with great pastoral responsibility, Msgr. René Perros proposed to Propaganda Fide to divide the Vicariate in three parts: Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Ratchaburi.⁵

⁴ The Monfortian Brothers have now the most famous catholic schools in Thailand: the Assumption group. The association of the catholic schools is very compact and strong in Thailand.

⁵ Fr. Robert Costet M.E.P. has been in Thailand since 1956. He is now in Ubon, North East Thailand. See: *Histoire de la Mission, Siam and Laos* by Fr. Robert Costet.

2. The arrival of the Salesians

2.1. *Contacts at the Congregation level*

In the years 1924-25, the Salesian Congregation was preparing to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Salesian missions and to this purpose some qualified confreres were giving talks on Salesian Missions, in parishes, schools, to cooperators and alumni to animate them about the missionary work and to get their support.

On the 25th of February 1924, Msgr. Dante Munerati, the Salesian Procurator in Rome, wrote a letter to inform the Superiors in Turin that he had received an unofficial note from His Excellency Cardinal Van Rossum, Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, saying that he would like to entrust a new mission in the Kingdom of Siam to the Salesians. He also said that he got this idea while listening to a talk on the Salesian Mission [this talk was given by Fr. Anton Fasulo, a Member of the Superior Council], he added that he was really impressed.⁶

In March 1925, the Rector Major Fr. Philip Rinaldi informed Propaganda Fide, through the same Procurator, that the Salesians were available in principle to accept the new Mission, but they needed to have detailed information and also some time to prepare, since they were already committed to a mission in Japan and all the other Missions were asking for reinforcement.

To this, the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Guglielmo Van Rossum on 10 June 1925 wrote to the Rector Major giving detailed information on the Kingdom of Siam and the new Mission. Propaganda Fide also was ready to allow a few years time to prepare.

One year after, on 10 June, Propaganda Fide wrote a second letter to the Rector Major to inform him that Msgr. G.B. De Guebriant, the Superior of the Mission Etrangères de Paris (M.E.P.) recently in Rome, had pressed PF for a quick solution to the practices to send new Missionaries to Siam.⁷ He also suggested that, for the climate conditions, it was advisable to send them in October.

Propaganda Fide, according to the expectations of Msgr. De Guebriant, was asking the Rector Major for an answer about the possibi-

⁶ This is the first document about the mission in Siam. It is not a document from PF. See Salesian archives document "Siam... 25.2.1924".

⁷ This document was signed by the Card. Roussum Prefect of PF Prot. N 1894/2.

lity to send a group of Missionaries in Autumn. To this letter of Propaganda Fide, the Rector Major answered on 19 June recalling to the agreement in which PF had allowed a few years time to the Salesian Congregation, otherwise it had not been possible to accept the new Mission, because of the urgent commitment of the Congregation in other Missions.⁸

On 23 July, Msgr. Francis Marchetti in the name of H.E. Cardinal Van Rossum, wrote a letter to the Rector Major, accepting his reason for the delay, but asking to send some qualified and experienced priests to contact Msgr. René Perros in Bangkok and survey the new Mission to prepare a kind of agreement.⁹

2.2. Contacts at local level: the survey of the Mission

Fr. Ignatius Canazei: in January 1926, Fr. Ignatius Canazei, the Salesian Provincial of China came to Bangkok in the name of the Rector Major to get first hand information about the mission that the M.E.P. were ready to give to the Salesians in Siam.¹⁰

On 15 January, he completed a Report¹¹ on the Mission to send to the Rector Major. According to this report, the Mission that the M.E.P. intended to give to the Salesians consisted of five Monthons (or Principalities) in the Kingdom of Siam: Ratchaburi, Suratthani, Nakhon Sithammarat, Phuket and Pattani (the present 19 provinces West and South of Bangkok); and the Region of Tenasserim in Burma (East and South of Rangoon) with the towns of Tavoy, Mergui and Victoria. That is the long narrow peninsula along the Burmese border down to the Malaysian Border: nearly 1,500 km long. The most southern part of Siam and the Region in Burma formerly were part of the Vicariate of Singapore (or Malacca).

Fr. Ignatius Canazei, as a missionary with some experience, at once suggested to the Rector Major that the Region in Burma could have been a problem to the Salesians, for political reasons. It would have been better that the mission were only within the limits of the Kingdom of Siam,

⁸ Doc. 3. See Dettagli nella storia, archivio salesiano.

⁹ This Document No 4. Prot. N2306/25. (See Sal. Arch.): "...as wisely has been done in Japan...".

¹⁰ He left Hongkong on the 13 December and arrived in Bangkok on 6 January. Then he left for Singapore on 17 January and arrived in Hongkong on 29 January. This from the Province Chronicle.

¹¹ See the report in the Salesian Archives.

as the M.E.P. were trying to do for themselves in Malaysia. He also suggested that to start it was necessary to send at least seven priests and a few lay brothers. It was not advisable to send clerics, as the Salesians had to stay with the French Fathers for a while.

He then drew maps of the mission and described how all the existing catholic communities in Thai territory (five larger and four very small) were all along the Mekhlong River¹² with Ratchaburi¹³ as a central town. South of Ratchaburi there was absolutely nothing and he suggested that the mission be called the Mission of Ratchaburi; in due time the territory could be divided into two missions.

On 6 December 1926, the Mission Council of Vicariate of Bangkok approved the proposed contract and was signed by Msgr. René Perros and the Economer of the Mission Fr. Louis Chorin and sent to the Salesians in Turin through the Superior of Society of the M.E.P. in Paris.¹⁴ Once again in February 1927, Propaganda Fide requested that the Salesians send the Missionaries as soon as possible.

2.3. Fr. Peter Ricaldone's survey and decisions

In 1927, Fr. Peter Ricaldone, the Prefect General of the Salesian Congregation (Vicar of the Rector Major), was visiting the Salesian Missions in India, China and Japan.

On 19 April 1927, he arrived in Bangkok with Msgr. Matthias to visit the new Mission in Siam. He intended to affiliate the Salesian community in Siam to the Province of India, but he soon changed his mind and he reached the conclusion that it was better to set up a Vice Province directly under the responsibility of the Rector Major.

On 28 April 1927, Fr. Peter Ricaldone sent his report to the Rector Major¹⁵ giving some further suggestions: it was urgent to ask for a mission only in Thai territory. To start it was necessary to send about seven priests and a few coadjutors. It was advisable to send priests no more than 35 years old to be able to learn the language well; besides it is convenient that at least two of them know the Chinese language. Maybe somebody from China.

¹² A river about 80 km west of Bangkok.

¹³ A provincial town nearly 100 South West of Bangkok.

¹⁴ See "Project de Contrat 6/12/1926. Sal archives S.D. 372.

¹⁵ See report in the Sal. Archives. 28/4/1927.

He signed the contract: accepting the Mission of Ratchaburi in Thai territory; a mission with an area of nearly 118,000 sq. km with two million people and around 6,600 Catholics. He then promised to the Bishop of Bangkok Msgr. René Perros that the Salesians would arrive before the end of the year.

Since there were no health care facilities in the upcountry, he asked permission to open a house in Bangkok to facilitate contacts at all levels, but also to study the possibility to open technical school for the poor young workers. It should be noted that Fr. Ricaldone did not mention any Formation House.

On 3 May of the same year, Fr. Peter Ricaldone wrote another letter to the Rector Major from Saigon¹⁶ telling him that he had made the decision to send some priests from China to Siam, also to prepare the place for an eventual evacuation of the Salesians from mainland China to Siam if things get too dangerous there.

On 6 July, the Rector Major wrote to Fr. Ricaldone telling him that he approved to send Fr. Pasotti to Siam, because the Novitiate in China would close.¹⁷ Fr. Ricaldone discussed the matter with Fr. Canazei for many days until 30 July, they could reach an agreement. After the retreats in Macao on 31 July, Fr. Ricaldone announced that he had destined Fr. Gaetano Pasotti as Superior for the Mission of Siam. Fr. John Casetta, the Novices and some others would go with him.¹⁸ Then, two priests, two students of Theology, four students of Philosophy, 12 novices and one lay brother: or a total of 22 confreres from the Province of China were assigned to the Mission of Siam.¹⁹

2.4. The arrival of the Salesians.

2.4.1. The first two Confreres in the Kingdom of Siam

On 16 August, Fr. John Casetta and the cleric Giorgio Bainotti sailed from Macao to Singapore and then traveled by train, they arrived in Bangkok on the 27th; they were welcomed with great enthusiasm by the

¹⁶ See letter of Fr. Ricaldone to the Rector Major N7/VI...3/5/ 1927.

¹⁷ Turin, Rinaldi to Ricaldone ASC – A 3790236.

¹⁸ House Chronicle 31st of July 1927, signed Fr. Braga.

¹⁹ As for the names see history of the Thai Mission: list of Salesians arrived in Siam.

French Fathers. The day after they arrived in Bangnokkhuek,²⁰ there were some buildings ready to accommodate the first Salesian Community. They had two months to prepare the place for the arrival of the official group. They got good cooperation from the Parish Priest Fr. Durand and the Catholic Community.

2.4.2. The official group

On 15 October, the official group sailed from Macao and they arrived in Bangkok on the 25th. The group was led by Fr. Peter Ricaldone himself. Fr. Gaetano Pasotti was the leader of the group.

At the Port of Bangkok, they received a warm welcome by the Bishop Msgr. René Perros, Fr. Emile Colombet and Fr. Louis Chorin. It was already three years they were waiting for the new Missionaries. Now their expectation had come true and they were so glad. The day after the group left by boat for Bangnokkhuek, they arrived at Bangnokkhuek after midnight: it was already the 27th of October. Here too the Parish Priest and the Catholic Community welcome them with big celebrations.

On 17 December, the complementary group arrived from Italy: four priests and two lay brothers. In four months the Salesians were already 28. On 11 December 1928, another group of 20 Salesians arrived, two priests, two Philosophy students and 16 novices, so that when the Salesians received the mission from the French Fathers M.E.P, on 1 January 1929, they were already 47, because one had died in August 1928.

In 1930, other 28 young Salesians arrived. In the period of only three years the Salesians were already 75, with only 11 priests. This massive arrival of young Salesian made a great impression among the religious working in the mission.

3. The Vicariate of Ratchaburi and the Thai Province

3.1. *The erection of the Vice Province*

The Salesian Community in Siam erected Vice-Province and Fr. Gaetano Pasotti first Rector of the Salesian Community and Vice-Provincial.

²⁰ A village about 30 km down the River Mekhlong from Ratchaburi.

As it has been mentioned earlier, Fr. Gaetano Pasotti had been named Superior of the Salesian Community in Siam since he was still in China. When Fr. Ricaldone arrived back in Turin on December 1927, he made a report to the Superior Council about his 12-month long visit to the Far East. On 12 December 1927, the Rector Major and his Council decided: "It is decided that the Houses in Siam form a new Vice Province apart from the Province of China and Fr. Gaetano Pasotti be named Vice Provincial;²¹ he had already been named Rector of the House of Bangnokkhuek...".

Then Fr. Canazei, as instructed by Fr. Ricaldone, wrote a formal request to the Rector Major on 24 January 1928 to detach Siam from China.²² It took more than seven months to receive the formal document.

On 28 August 1928, Fr. Pasotti received the official appointment as Acting Provincial in the name of the Superior in Turin (Visitatore). Little by little he prepared his pastoral plan with great courage and pastoral vision.

On 26 March 1929, after the Salesians had received the Mission, the Rector Major, Fr. Philip Rinaldi canonically erected Bangnokkhuek²³ as the first Salesian House in Siam. Later the Rector Major canonically erected at Bangnokkhuek the Formation House on 15 June 1932.²⁴ The first Rector was Fr. Emmanuel Almazan. Practically, however, this House was already working since 1929.

The first year for the Salesians was all wonder and learning: it was like a year of practical training under the guidance of the French Fathers and some good local people: they dedicated to learn the language, the culture, the history, to know the Catholic Communities and everything about the reality of the Country and to adjust themselves to the climate.

There were some joyful events: on 8 December 1927, the first group of novices made their first Profession here in the Kingdom of Siam. In January, they started at once the Course of Philosophy. On 2 June 1928, two students of Theology, received their Priestly Ordination, the first Salesians to have this Grace of God in the King of Siam. There were also some important visitors who came to know the newly arrived in so large a number.

²¹ ASC-D 873 *Verbali delle riunioni del Capitolari*, V, 3 gennaio 1927, 8 novembre 1935, p. 55 [5013-6].

²² See 1928.01.24/Ca.

²³ According to the Document he had received from Rome N. 1519/29.

²⁴ According to the Document he received from Propaganda Fide N. 4534/31 dated in Rome 22nd of December 1931.

However, there happened also a very sorrowful event. On 6 August 1928, the young and qualified confrere Fr. De Nicola Vincenzi passed away. He was Doctor in Philosophy and had come especially to teach the young confreres. Due to this sudden death, Msgr. René Perros came personally for the funeral and being really concerned about the health of the Salesians, he kindly invited them to go for a month rest at Sriracha.²⁵

3.2. *Important guests pay visit*

Remarkable was the visit of the Ambassador of France on 8 September, the last year the French missionaries celebrated the Nativity of Our Lady, the feast of the Church. In this occasion the Ambassador expressed his opinion regretting that the French missionaries had given the mission with all the institutions to the Italians. To this the French missionaries answered that the mission was not French, but of the Church, they were not giving it to the Italians, but to another group of workers in the Church: the Salesians had come to continue the work started by the Church many years ago. They also hoped that the Salesians could still do better with so many young missionaries.

Meanwhile, the civil authorities also wanted to meet the Salesians: on 9 January 1929, the Princes Nakhon Sawan and Dhanee Nivat, Minister of the Education came to pay a visit to the Salesians at Bangnokkhuek. On 9 March, the Governor of Makhlong also came with 600 scouts. The Italian Ambassador also came on 17 February. Lastly, but not the least, the Apostolic Delegate Msgr. Colombano Dreyer also paid a visit. All these visits gave encouragement to the new comers, while they were trying their best to adjust to the new situation.

3.3. *Missio Sui Juris, Prefecture and Vicariate. The Thai Province*

The Salesians had started to work in the mission field with full responsibility on 1 January 1929. On 30 June 1930, Pope Pius XI with a "Motu Proprio" Decree established the "Missio sui juris" of Ratchaburi entrusting it to the Salesian Congregation.²⁶ On 28 February, the Sacred

²⁵ A place on the sea coast some 120 km west of Bangkok.

²⁶ See Sal. Arch. Documents N. 6847.

Congregation of Propaganda Fide named Fr. Gaetano Pasotti Administrator of this Mission.²⁷

The decree regarding the mission made special mention of the three Provinces²⁸ of Ratchaburi, Suratthani and Nakhon Sithammarat detached from the Vicariate of Bangkok and the two Provinces of Pattani and Phuket detached from the Vicariate of Malacca and thus erecting the new Mission “sui juris” of Ratchaburi.

On 28 May 1934, Propaganda Fide named Fr. Gaetano Pasotti as Apostolic Prefect of the Mission of Ratchaburi, which became Prefecture Apostolic.²⁹

On 3 April 1941, since the French Fathers M.E.P. were expelled, because of the Indochina war, Pope Pius the XII with a special decree, erected the Prefecture Apostolic of Ratchaburi to the rank of Vicariate and Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti as Bishop of the Vicariate.³⁰ He was Consecrated Bishop on 24 June. For the same reasons, Msgr. Pasotti was named Apostolic Delegate for one year and special administrator of the Vicariate of Laos for five years.

3.4. The erection of Thai Province

Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti had been Superior both of the Mission and of the Salesians as Acting Provincial (Visitatore) until 1937. Everybody was working for the Mission of Ratchaburi and everything was the property of the Mission.

In 1937, there were already 84 confreres (they could have been many more if all stayed), with some 12 Thais. In May 1937, Fr. Candela came to Siam for the Extraordinary Visitation and the Thai Province was erected on 20 December 1937. Fr. John Casetta was named Provincial in January 1938.

In February 1939, the Superiors approved the distinction of property and administration between the Mission and the Thai Province. The Thai Province got only St. Joseph School in Banpong, the piece of land in Hua Hin and the house in Bangkok, because these places had been acquired

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Decree N. 774/31.

²⁸ Meaning 3 Monthons or Principalities, according to the former administrative system.

²⁹ See Decree N. 2316 28 May 1934.

³⁰ See Decree Prot. N. 1838/41 Sal. Arch. S 273 Pasotti. See the topic “Persecution”.

by the Salesians with funds from the Superior of Turin. Starting in 1939, the Salesians had to transfer the Provincial residence and the Formation House out of Bangnokkhuek to a new suitable place.

4. The first 20 years of Salesian work

4.1. *The formation of the personnel*

First task of the superior of the mission was the care for the formation of the young Salesian confreres, start the local seminary and look for other groups to work in different fields.

For the formation of the young Salesian confreres, Fr. Pasotti had capable cooperators in Fr. John Casetta, Fr. Emmanuel Almazan, Fr. Herrero and Fr. Silvio De Munari. Those who came in the first year had their post-novitiate and practical training rather informal. The house of formation was opened practically in 1930. The house of formation became a matter of concern and preoccupation for Fr. Pasotti and his collaborators for many years, because of the lack of formators and financial problems. He wrote a few letters to the Superiors about this matter.³¹

It is amazing to discover how many letters Fr. Gaetano Pasotti wrote to the Superiors and Propaganda Fide; how many reports about the situation of the Confreres and the work and also how many news to newspapers and Bulletins. All this was to keep in contact, ask permission and obtain financial support for the mission.

In 1932, Fr. Pasotti also erected the five larger churches as Salesian houses, so that the clerics could have their practical training there.

The Salesians who arrived as students, were ordained priests in batches: six in 1933; other six in 1936 and other two in Rome; other six in 1939 and nine in 1940. At the end of 1940, the Salesians priests were 34. They could have been many more.³²

Before leaving for Italy in April 1929, Fr. Pasotti had already provided for the opening of the indigenous seminary for the mission, which was opened in 1930.

In 1931, two indigenous Priests of the Vicariate of Bangkok joined the Mission of Ratchaburi and later some seminarians joined the Salesians.

³¹ See Letters to the Superiors 27/2/1933; 19/11/1933; 10/1/1934 and many others.

³² See remarks at the end of this report.

This however sparked a kind of discontent between the Salesians and the M.E.P.³³ On 14 November 1931, the first batch of six Salesian Sisters arrived in the Kingdom of Siam and went to stay in Bangnokkhuek too. Later, they fixed their centre in Banpong.

At the end of April 1936 the cloister nuns "The Capuchin Poor Clares" (O.C.C.) arrived to open their first convent in Banpong. All this was part of the pastoral plan of Msgr. Gaetano Pasotti.³⁴

Since the FMA Sisters could not go and stay in mission stations and the Sisters Lovers of the Cross founded by the Society of the M.E.P. retired in the Vicariate of Bangkok, in 1937, Msgr. Pasotti founded a new Congregation of indigenous sisters: *The Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary* to help the pastoral work among girls in mission stations in a simple Thai way.

4.2. The pastoral work

In the initial agreement, the Salesians had to send about seven priests and a few coadjutors, but later, there was a change of plans and a large number of young confreres arrived to the new mission in Siam. In 1930, there were 11 Salesian priests for the pastoral work and the formation house.

In September 1928, after receiving the official nomination to Vice Provincial, Fr. Gaetano Pasotti proceeded to appoint the five priests who had to take charge of the different mission stations and he sent them to stay with the French Fathers to learn the situation. On 1 January, the French Fathers of the Society of M.E.P. withdrew and the Salesian Fathers officially started to work in the new mission. He gave them an order: "Keep things going, nothing must be changed at least for one year; if there is need to change ask my permission first...."

Between the 6th and the 20th of January 1929, Fr. Gaetano Pasotti with Fr. Joseph Pinaffo went to the South to receive officially the two Monthons of Pattani and Phuket from the French Fathers of the Vicariate of Malacca.

While he was in Phuket, he wrote a letter to the Rector Major telling him about the warm welcome he received from the Governor of the Is-

³³ See Fr. Costet: *Histoire de la Mission Siam and Laos* N. 17.

³⁴ See Records of the Mission Council 13/10/1931 and also 29/6/1932.

land of Phuket.³⁵ The preoccupations and the stress to get everything going well had an impact on his health. He got very sick and in April, he went to Italy for the Salesian Chapter and to recover. He came back on 30 April 1930.

When he came back, he went to the North of Siam to survey the place. The Congregation of Propaganda Fide, seeing the massive arrival of the Salesians, had an idea of giving them also the Mission of Chieng Mai. But after four years of contacts, this plan was dropped, because the Missionaries of the Society of the M.E.P. were not of the same idea.

Fr. G. Pasotti traveled a lot to keep contacts with missionaries, see the work, give approval for the new projects and look for new ways for pastoral work. He understood that the rural areas were suitable to settle new comers or poor families to build their life, but the larger markets in towns were more suitable places for schools and youth centres. Fr. Gaetano Pasotti had soon singled out some places which, in his understanding were particularly suitable for new foundation or development: Banpong, Ratchaburi and Hua Hin Banpong, a Chinese market town was the first place to receive a special attention and care. With great confidence in the Providence, Fr. Pasotti allowed Fr. Joseph Pinaffo to build a new building for the already existing small wooden school of St. Joseph. In December 1932, this building was opened. This was the first the Salesians built in Siam. St. Joseph School made steady progress up to these days. Later, the new church building was built. The Catholic Community here made rapid progress and now is still the biggest centre of the Diocese of Ratchaburi.

Ratchaburi: the provincial town was the next target. When, in the year 1933, Fr. Pasotti got some more priests, he was already planning new foundations. He appointed a young but zealous missionary to this task: Fr. Mario Ruzzeddu. In April 1934, at the young age of 24, he was assigned to start the new foundation: Don Bosco, in the town of Ratchaburi. He opened a church, a youth centre and an evening class teaching. Anyhow, this place did not make progress, because of financial problems and after five years of hard work it was closed. It was reopened in 1955 by Msgr. Peter Carretto with a real great plan. Now it is a big complex and the centre of the Diocese.³⁶

³⁵ See letter 20/1/1929.

³⁶ This subject will be continued with the topic missionary trips in the South.

4.3. Important achievements in the mission: Sixth task: The schools.

The Salesians arrived in the Kingdom of Siam at a time when the Kingdom was issuing the laws about compulsory Education (1918–1932). In Bangkok, there were already some prestigious colleges, but in the upcountry, the education was still rather limited to the male sex in the Pagodas.

With the new laws, the French missionaries had already opened simple schools for the Catholics near the churches. But all these schools, except for Bangnokkhuek and were only very simple convent schools with two rooms and a catechist teacher.

The Salesians, being an educational Congregation, saw at once the importance to open the schools also to the non-Catholics. So within 12 years since their arrival, the Salesians had already upgraded all the existing schools and opened others in the small mission stations.

4.4. Missionary trips to the South and new presences

As Fr. Ignatius Canazei reported to the Rector Major in the 16 provinces along the 1,200 km long peninsula South of Ratchaburi, there was absolutely no church or any christian community. Fr. Peter Ricaldone suggested that later the South could be the place for another mission.

Hua Hin. Staying at Ratchaburi, Fr. Mario Ruzzeddu in 1934, started to visit the catholic families in Hua Hin and Prachuab (120 km further South). In October, he was able to open the first chapel in Hua Hin, bought the present precious piece of land not far from the sea as a place for summer vacations. A year later, the mission built a vacation house and the St. Theresa Church was transferred to the new place. After the Second World War, this became the place for the formation house, a school and the retreat house. Now it is a flourishing tourist place.

4.5. Hat Yai (nearly 1,000 km. South of Bangkok).

In 1935, Fr. Mario Ruzzeddu started to go further South of Hua Hin to visit the 14 southern provinces. Msgr. Pasotti too went down to visit the Chinese people. Starting in 1936, the trips to Chumphon, Surathhnai, Phuket, Hat Yai and all the other provinces were quite regular at least

twice a year for six years, traveling only with public means and spending 20 to 40 days for each trip. In 1937, Msgr. Pasotti opened St. Peter Church in Betong, a Chinese District near the border of Malaysia.

In 1940, Msgr. Pasotti and the Provincial had singled out Hat Yai as the more suitable place to open the first Catholic Centre in the South. In February 1941, Fr. Mario Ruzzeddu went to stay in Hat Yai and opened the first Catholic Centre of the South. From there, he took care to visit all the scattered Catholic Families in the 14 provinces of the South. Up to now Hat Yai is still the Salesian centre of the South, even though Suratthani has become the Diocesan centre.

4.6. Important events: the Salesians and the Persecution

After nearly 90 years of peace, freedom and steady progress for the Church in Siam, the situation for the Catholics became critical once again. In 1934, a nationalist military government went to power and began to change laws according to its policies. In 1939, the Dictator Luang Phibun Songkhram became Prime Minister. In 1940, taking advantage that France was overrun by the Germans in Europe, he prepared to go to war against France in Indochina.³⁷

The Persecution: after a few months of nationalistic propaganda against the French by radio and newspapers, on 28 November 1940, all the French were ordered to move out of the Eastern Provinces and leave the country including priests, brothers and nuns. Besides, since the Catholics were related to the French Fathers, brothers or nuns, the Thais thought that in case of war they might also take side for the French, so the propaganda was also inciting all to reject the French Religion and become Buddhist for the sake of national unity.

So some nationalist extremist groups, with the support of the government, and also some fervent government officials took advantage of the situation to go against the Catholic Institutions and to compel everybody to declare themselves Buddhist for the sake of unity in time of war. For this purpose, a day was appointed for the ceremony: on 14 February 1941, the Buddhist feast of Makhabucha, many Catholics went to sign their name out of fear.

³⁷ See historical background at the beginning.

The persecution of the Catholics and Catholic Institution was particularly fierce in the two months of December 1940 and January 1941. At the beginning of February 1941, an order was issued, to stop violence against non Buddhists, but in many places the persecution continued until 1944.

The persecution was devastating in the Eastern Provinces touched by the one month war. Some Thai priests and nuns were imprisoned or compelled to take off their religious robes. The Catholic Schools and churches were closed or torn down. The Catholics were harassed in many ways.

In December 1940, in the Village of Songkhon in the Nakhon Phanom Province near the River Maekhong, seven people, who refused to deny their religion, were shot dead and became the first Thai Martyrs. In January 1941, some Thai priests were imprisoned and declared guilty. Fr. Nicolaus Boonkert Kitbanrung, after three years in prison, died after converting to the catholic faith other 68 people in prison. He, together with the seven of Sonkhon are now the Blessed eight Thai Martyrs.

4.7. The precious work of Salesians.

In 1940, the Salesians had 33 priests. They were planning new foundations, but had not yet started any, other than the Procure in Bangkok. When the persecution broke out, the Salesians, being Italians, were free to speak, write and go around. So somebody started to write about the Freedom of Religion stated in the Constitution (art. 13); others were called privately by the Thai priests or Catholics to help some churches nearby (Fr. Ceccarelli to Nong Hin, Fr. Hector Frigerio and Fr. John Casetta to Nakhon Chaisi and Fr. Charles Casetta and Joseph Pinaffo to Chiang Mai).

On 20 February 1941, Msgr. René Perros, in a handwritten note, asked the help of the Salesians to guard the Sacred Heart Seminary of Sriracha. Then through Fr. Joakim Thieo, in a written agreement, he asked for Salesian priests to help the churches on the border East of Bangkok.

Let me cite an important letter of the Provincial Fr. John Casetta to the Rector Major on the 14 of March 1941. I shall write it in Italian as it was written:

“Su 18 Padri francesi, 13 sono partiti (per Saigon).... Sono partiti anche 13 Brothers Monfortiani e 15 Suore. Quindi molte cristianità e opere nel

Vicariato di Bangkok sono senza pastore. Il Vescovo venne ripetutamente a supplicarmi di mandare salesiani nei posti più importanti. Si tratta di salvare la Chiesa in Thailandia. Assicuro che i nostri non risparmiano sacrifici. Mio primo impegno sarà di salvaguardare la salvezza dei Confratelli, di non lasciarli soli. Ma, essendo la "salus populi" che è in gioco, ed essendo la situazione gravissima, domando di poter, d'accordo con il consiglio, approfittare della facoltà che mi ha dato in gennaio di destinare, in periodo così anormale, sacerdoti a salvare le cristianità pericolanti, trasferendoli secondo il bisogno.... Siamo, amatissimo Padre, in difficilissime condizioni. Ci buttiamo umilmente ai piedi della cara Madre Ausiliatrice e La supplichiamo a volerci aiutare, perchè siamo degni del nostro Padre Don Bosco.... Qualunque cosa disponga di noi il Signore, speriamo con l'aiuto di Don Bosco, di essere degni dell'ora che passa per il bene di questo caro popolo. Don Casetta".

Starting in March 1941, Some Salesian priests (Fr. Costanzo Cavalla and Fr. Delfino Crespi) took turns to guard the Seminary of Sriracha. Some went to take care of some churches on the eastern border, especially around Sriracha.

In April, also the substitute of the Bishop of Laos, Fr. Srinuan asked for the help of the Salesians for the churches in the North East. Before sending the Salesian priests, with a circular letter, Fr. John Casetta asked the opinion of all the confreres. All were of the same opinion: we have to go. In all, 12 Salesian priests then went to the East and the North East to give courage and revive the Catholic Communities in the Vicariate of Nong Saeng, especially in Ubon, Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon. Fr. Joseph Pinaffo was also taken prisoner, because he was too outspoken. But then, he was quickly released, because he was Italian. The same Fr. Joseph Pinaffo then wrote in his diary all what happened to him and the other Salesian priests between May 1941 to October 1943.

Msgr. Pasotti, after being named and consecrated bishop, had to take up the duty of Apostolic Delegate for one year and Administrator of the Vicariate of Laos for five years. He called all those who wanted to further their studies as seminarians, to the Mission Seminary in Bangnokkhuek. With a special permission from the Ministry of Interior, he also visited all the churches in the North East and asked the Governor to reopen many of them. In November 1944, after the change of government, he also went to see the new Minister of Interior and obtained the restitution of all the properties of the church in the North East.³⁸

³⁸ See Diary of Fr. Joseph Pinaffo... Salesian provincial archive.

5. Some problems of the personnel. The restart in 1948

5.1. Some problems regarding the confreres

Some statistics: In the first year 1927, the Salesians who arrived in the Mission of Siam were already 28. One died in August 1928. In December 1928, other 20 arrived. In 1930, other 28 confreres arrived in two groups: that is 75 in only three years.

Then in 1935 – 36 other groups arrived. When the Thai Province was erected in December 1937, the Salesian confreres sent to the Mission of Ratchaburi were already 99. Together with 13 Thais who had also joined, the total number could have been 112. They were only 84, because two died and other 26 returned.

At the end of the year 1947, the total number of foreign confreres who arrived was 102. The Thais were 14. So the total number could have been 116. Of these 116, two have died, 56 either returned or left. So at the end of the year 1947, the total number of confreres in the Province was only of 58.

This massive arrival and this great number of members that left made great impression.... The Superiors in Turin wanted to know the reasons why so many confreres left. The Provincial Fr. John Casetta had to give some points of explanation: some young confreres were not mature enough nor highly motivated, not ready to endure the sacrifices and difficulties of the mission. Some, when sent for their practical training in mission stations lost their religious spirit and left. Some priests were sent to this mission after they had failed in other places and some of them caused some sufferings to the other confreres.³⁹ Fr. Peter Carretto, a priest who acquired some credibility and experience while Rector of the Procure in Bangkok during the Persecution and the war, while he was Rector in the St. Joseph College Banpong in 1946, wrote a letter to the Superiors in Turin, because he was asked to do so by some confreres who had great trust in him.⁴⁰ The letter is four pages long. It tells of the state of the Province in its crude reality:

- Too many idle confreres jammed in Banpong.
- It was time to open new presences with courage.

³⁹ See letter of Fr. John Casetta to the Superiors 18/2/1939 and 14/11/1939.

⁴⁰ See the letter of Fr. Peter Carretto to Fr. Berruti 23/12/1946.

- The Province needed a change, because some have been in key position for too long a time with little fatherly spirit of Don Bosco.
- A number of confreres did not trust nor cooperate with the Superiors.

Actually the Provincial Fr. John Casetta was preparing some new presences: Hat Yai, Hua Hin and the technical school in Bangkok. But he had some financial problems. He also had to solve the problem of difficult confreres.

Later, Fr. Peter Carretto was called to Turin and named Provincial with clear orders on what to do and how to proceed with the difficult confreres. He carried out the task with decision and in good accord with the Superiors.

In 1948, the Apostolic Delegate told Fr. Peter Carretto that he felt the duty to send his report to Rome, because he was concerned about the Salesians. Fr. Peter Carretto asked him for some time to settle everything. In 1948 there was a great change and restart: (1) The House of Formation was opened in Hua Hin. (2) There were new foundations: Hua Hin, Hat Yai, Don Bosco Technical school in Bangkok; actually all prepared by the former Provincial. (3) A new Provincial and new Rectors: new people in key positions. (4) New groups of missionaries arrived.

In 1967 the Salesians were 123 and there was a great variety of work.

5.2. *Some personal remarks*

- ❑ The fact that so many young Confreres were sent to the new Mission in Siam and in a short period of time, required that the mission be entrusted to them as early as in 1929.
- ❑ The Salesians had too few priests to attend to the formation of the confreres and to the pastoral work of the mission. And also they had too little experience of the Thai culture and mission work in Siam.
- ❑ From some points of view, so many young confreres and still in the period of formation sent to the mission since the beginning caused some concerns and difficulties to the mission as a whole. The house of formation was not well equipped for the job. There were some financial and natural difficulties. Some of the

confreres were not mature enough or highly motivated; they easily got discouraged and left.

- From other points of view, if we consider the good number of young and capable priests the Salesians had in 1940 (33) and the precious work they did for the Church in Thailand during the persecution, we can say that this had been arranged by the Providence of God.

As soon as Msgr. Pasotti was appointed Apostolic Delegate and also Apostolic Vicar of the Vicariate of Laos, he wrote to Fr. Braga, expressing this view:

“It is only for the love of God that I could bow my head to receive all this. I now understand the meaning of obedience after I have experienced the heavy burden of it on my own shoulder. Maybe the Providence of God sent and prepared the Salesians, so that in the moment of need they were there ready to do the job and save so many people in this great thunderstorm. I assure you that the sons of St. John Bosco will do their best to accomplish the will of God with great responsibility...”⁴¹.

⁴¹ See letter 27/10/1941.