

BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE FOUNDATION OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF MIYAZAKI

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Introduction

In the year in which Pope Pius XI promulgated the encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926), on 16 February 1926, the Salesian missionaries arrived in Miyazaki, Japan, center of their mission, and capital of the province in the Island of Kyushu.¹

On the same year, Japan was greeting the beginning of the period Shōwa of which its first years, different from the period Taishō of the reforms and of the consolidation of the economic-social formation, were characterized by imperialism and colonialism and grave economic crises. The Church in Japan had undergone strong opposition by the Japanese government, with the nationalistic climate of the country. Moreover, it is good to remember the negative prejudices of the people towards Christianity created during the persecution and which rendered the activities of the missionaries difficult.

The Sisters of Charity of Miyazaki, born from the humble activity of the women Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul, was founded in this social-political-ecclesial environment, in faithfulness to the wish of the Holy Father² and to the spirit of Don Bosco. But it was also the result of the initiative of Fr. V. Cimatti and Fr. A. Cavoli, becoming "one of the works most characteristic of the missionary action of the Salesians in Japan".³

1. Before the foundation (1929-1937)

The Salesian missionaries, while trying to learn the difficult Japanese language and to accept the Japanese customs, began immediately

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¹ A. CREVACORE, *Un uomo dalle molte vite, il servo di Dio Don Vincenzo Cimatti*. Torino 1979, 215 p.

² Cf V. CIMATTI, *Breve Cronistoria dei primi 25 anni di lavoro salesiano in Giappone*, pp. 130-131. Lettera di don Cimatti a don Ricaldone 31/8/1937.

³ L. FIORA, *Don Vincenzo Cimatti, il Don Bosco del Giappone*. Torino 1996, 195 p.

their apostolic activity going particularly to the poor and the needy as based on the Remembrances of Don Bosco to his missionaries: "Take special care of the sick, of children, of the old and of the poor, and you will gain the blessings of God and the benevolence of men".⁴

With generosity and good will, also the words of farewell of the Rector Major Fr. F. Rinaldi oriented the action and the life of the missionaries. At the end of the mass of 29 December 1925, on the day of departure of the first missionaries for Japan, Fr. Rinaldi "inculcated charity as the unique means or at least the indispensable in order to be able to penetrate the soul of this people".⁵ You should further remember, the apostolic orientation of Fr. Cimatti, then Superior of the mission, which is expressed with generous works saying "The works of charity will be those which will save the missions in Japan".⁶

Following this directive, Fr. Cimatti, hardly began his activity as parish priest in Miyazaki (1927-1929), aside from the typical Salesian activity, he felt the necessity to intervene in whatever manner towards the poor which surrounded him and already had the idea of a shelter to welcome them.⁷ He shared this idea with Fr. Cavoli, then assistant parish priest, so that in the month of September 1929, with Fr. Cavoli, he undertook a discreet apostolic activity by founding a leading "feminine circle of the Immaculate", whose principal end was that of visiting the homes of the numerous poor and sick of the city and bringing to them the comfort of Christian religion. This work was later consolidated under the form of the Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul, and was approved by the General Council of the Conference of Bologna in 1934.⁸

In 1930, the first old and most needy children, also among the children of lepers transferred from the Franciscan Sisters of May at Hitoyoshi, were first entrusted to good families. But soon Fr. Cavoli, who had become parish priest, became convinced that there was the need of providing a house for them with persons who could care for them. Thus, Fr. Cavoli, with the constant paternal support of Fr. Cimatti, notwithstanding

⁴ Cf BS 62 (1938) 132.

⁵ A. CAVOLI, *Dall'Italia al Giappone: autobiografia di un missionario*. Rimini, Tip. Garattoni, 1959, p. 79.

⁶ Scritti di don Cimatti 5.

⁷ Nel quaderno di don Cimatti in 1928 si legge: "Idea da studiarsi: Vi sono alcuni vecchi abbandonati... Casa di ricovero? Dove? A chi affidarli?...".

⁸ Cf A. CAVOLI, *Dall'Italia al Giappone* p. 81; Id., *Conferenza missionaria femminile della B. Imelda Lambertini a Miyazaki*. Bologna, Tipografia Luigi Parma, 1934; Lettera di don Cimatti a don Ricaldone 31/1/1939.

the contrary opinions of the confreres who were preoccupied by the precarious economic situation of the mission, brought forward this project of charity.⁹

Thus, on 18 December 1932,¹⁰ the hospice of *Kyūgoïn* was solemnly blessed in the presence of civil authorities and other personalities. There were speeches which exalted Christian charity. On 11 January 1933, the first four old people entered the hospice. And on 16 August of the same year, the section for orphans was added.¹¹

For their service, Fr. Cavoli looked for ladies who would work for the hospice gratuitously. The first of the ladies who answered the call was Taki Osafune,¹² who would later become mother general of the CSM. Fr. Cavoli “provided them a brief regulation for the apostolate, as well as for the community life and practices of piety. Thus, he created a lay association with a spirit of sacrifice which distinguished its members from the beginning”.¹³ From October 1933 to August 1935, Fr. Cavoli was in Italy for reasons of health and to seek financial help for the new work.¹⁴

“In the absence of Fr. Cavoli, Fr. Cimatti substituted him in guiding the hospice, particularly the personnel. He tried to give a greater religious formation to the young girls. He preached to them spiritual retreats, gave them periodical conferences, encouraged them and enthused them... in his mind, he saw among them «the future sisters» which he already dreamt for a long time”.¹⁵

On November 1934, the hospice had already 75 persons, made up of the old, children and personnel.¹⁶ Thus, the need came for constructing a larger hospice. The number of collaborators also increased. By August 1935, when Fr. Cavoli returned, the construction was almost completed, so that on 29 September the hospice was solemnly blessed and inaugurated.¹⁷

⁹ Cf A. CAVOLI, *Dall'Italia al Giappone*, pp. 87-88.

¹⁰ Cf Lettera di don Cavoli a don Ricaldone 12/1933; Cronaca personale di don Cimatti 18/12/1932.

¹¹ Cf Cronaca di *Kyūgoïn* in 1935.

¹² Cf K. TANIGUCHI, *Conquista desafio e esperança, Vida de Irmã Maria Osafune Taki. Irmãs de Caridade de Miyazaki*, 1992.

¹³ A. CAVOLI, *Dall'Italia al Giappone*, p. 89; Cf Cronaca di *Kyūgoïn* in 1933.

¹⁴ Lettera di don Cimatti a don Ricaldone 23/9/1933.

¹⁵ Cf Cronaca della parrocchia di Miyazaki 19/8/1933; Cronaca di *Kyūgoïn* in 1933-1935.

¹⁶ Cf L. TASSINARI, *Don Cimatti visto da vicino*, a cura della comunità “Salesio Hause”, Pro manoscritto, Beppu 1999, p. 65.

¹⁷ Lettera di don Cimatti a don Ricaldone 1/10/1935.

The daily life in the hospice was based on the spirit of St. John Bosco: piety, morality, work, family spirit, cheerfulness. Inspired by this spirit, the young Japanese girls, now called *Daughters of Charity*, consecrated their lives generously for work of good, and were formed to such spirit.¹⁸

In 1936, Fr. Liviabella also left for the same scope. At the same period, in the Hospice, the Santa Maria printing press was set up in order to send newsletters entitled *Voci Lontane* (Far-away Voices) to Italian benefactors. Later, it began to print other newsletters for Catholics and non-Catholics.¹⁹

2. Foundation of the new Native Congregation “Sisters of Charity” (1937)

Fr. Cavoli said in his autobiography: “My first idea was that of a lay association without vows and without habit”.²⁰ He never thought of founding a religious institute. On the contrary, several times, he emphasized to the group of women, the opportunity and the beauty of a lay association. Instead, it was Fr Cimatti who thought of founding a congregation.

Fr. Cimatti, who for four years already, held in his heart the idea of founding a new religious institute, seeing that the times were mature, one day in 1937, confided this to Fr. Cavoli, following his usual criterion of entrusting to the others with faith, the apostolic initiatives idealized by him. Fr. Cavoli told this in his autobiography.

“...One day in 1937, Fr. Cimatti expressed to me the convenience, given the time which were maturing, and also to comply to the pontifical directives, to found a religious congregation for women, capable of providing to the direction of the Hospice and, consequently, also to expand elsewhere with similar works of charity...”²¹

Notwithstanding the resistance of Fr. Cavoli, who alleged his lack of capability, Fr. Cimatti insisted on his invitation. “At the third time - continued Fr. Cavoli - I feared that I might be disobeying and thus bowing

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cf Cronaca di *Kyūgojin* in 1935; Cronaca personale di don Cimatti in 1936; *BS* 15/7/1936.

²⁰ A. CAVOLI, *Dall'Italia al Giappone*, p. 95; Cf *Id.*, *Conferenza missionaria femminile della B. Imelda Lambertini a Miyazaki*, p. 29.

²¹ A. CAVOLI, *Dall'Italia al Giappone*, pp. 95-96.

my head, I answered him saying the words of St. Peter 'On your word I shall throw the net'".²²

In the same way, Fr. Cimatti also intended to follow the directives of the Church. In fact, Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae*, addressed all prefects apostolic who were working in the missions, and hoped for the creation of new religious congregations, male and female, composed of native religious.²³

Notwithstanding the initial perplexity for an unexpected announcement, most of the ladies who were already working at the hospice, opted to enter the religious life. They immediately began the process for the approval by the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda Fide in Rome. On 6 June, Fr. Cimatti received the authorization to found a new congregation, while the formal decree of institution was issued on 1 August 1938. Fr. Cimatti indicated the scope of the new Institute: "The special scope of the new Congregation is the propagation of the faith with works of charity, whether corporal or spiritual...in every kind of work of social assistance for all kinds of persons".²⁴

The first novices were entrusted to the Congregation of the Visitation founded by Msgr. Albert Breton, then Prefect Apostolic of Fukuoka. Such concession was given on 15 August 1937, with the declaration of the foundation of a new religious congregation by Fr. Cimatti, the prefect apostolic of Miyazaki, which can also be considered as the date of the foundation of the Congregation of the Caritas. Five aspirants were chosen to be the first novices.

On 22 August, the investiture to the novitiate was made in the parish of Miyazaki in the hands of Fr. Cimatti.²⁵ After a year of absence of Fr. Cimatti, Fr. Cavoli celebrated in the church of the Hospice the investiture of the four new aspirants.

On 31 January 1939, the first solemn religious profession was celebrated. In that ceremony presided by Fr. Cimatti, Prefect Apostolic of Miyazaki, Sr. Maria Osafune and Sr. Giuliana Kubo pronounced their first vows.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Cf Lettera di don Cimatti a don Ricaldone 31/8/1937.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Cronaca personale di don Cimatti 22/8/1937.

3. Period of trial (1937-1945)

From the name of the place of origin, the newly established religious institute was called “Sisters of Charity of Miyazaki”.²⁶ Fr. Cavoli chose the name *Caritas* because, “through the CSM, the advice of Fr. Rinaldi may be relived in a great number of souls”.²⁷

After the foundation, from April 1939, Fr. Cavoli, leaving the office of parish priest to Fr. Liviabella, dedicated himself to the religious formation of the aspirants and of the Sisters with the help of Fr. Cimatti and of other Salesians. On 31 January 1938 (the approval would only be in 1949 because of the war), with study and research, finally managed to complete the draft of the Constitutions and gave them to the Sisters. Moreover, he dedicated himself to the composition of the Manual of Formation, a useful and concrete guide to be put into practice the religious life.²⁸

But, on 8 December 1941, feast of the Immaculate Conception, the news which would put into test the work of the Caritas arrived: the beginning of the Pacific War. Immediately, the celebrations were suspended. After several days, Fr. Cavoli learned that he could no longer mail “Voci Lontane”. Furthermore, and what was worse, the entrance of outside help would no longer be authorized. At that time, the Hospice was one big family of more than 200 persons, so that if help did not come from Italy, it would have meant that it could no longer continue.

Fr. Cavoli, preoccupied of the situation, consulted with the Sisters and asked the prayer of the whole community. The common decision was to continue the Word without hoping for subsidies, trusting only Divine Providence. Thus, they turned to farming²⁹ and breeding animals; they even put up a small factory for small bamboo objects. Thus, they worked for four years, something which no man would have done.³⁰

Because of the long and hard work, and poverty, six Sisters died of tuberculosis and pneumonia. Meanwhile, even Fr. Cavoli had to officially

²⁶ Ma, nei primi documenti, il nome della Congregazione viene presentato come “Solores Charitatis in Japonia”.

²⁷ A. CAVOLI, *Dall'Italia al Giappone*, p. 97.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁹ Vicino alla parrocchia di Tano la cui cura pastorale era affidata ai salesiani, si trovava il terreno incolto di circa cinque ettari e una vigna. Nel febbraio del 1939, don Cavoli decise di mandarci le suore e le aspiranti per coltivarlo, e per facilitare lo spostamento per il lavoro, comprò una casa a Tano che sarà la prima filiazione della casa madre.

³⁰ Cf V. M. TANIGUCHI, *Come Girasoli, Don Antonio Cavoli e la Congregazione Caritas di Miyazaki*. Leumann-Torino, Elle Di Ci, 1988, pp. 100-103.

abandon the direction of the Hospice. It was because in 1945, all foreign missionaries of the island of Kyushu were interned like prisoners at the foot of the Aso volcano, in the province of Kumamoto. They were put under very rigid surveillance to prevent them from escaping. They were freed after two months, however.³¹

World War II ended on 15 August 1945, feast of the Assumption. All the missionaries were freed. When they returned, the Hospice was in a disastrous condition on account of the bombardment and natural calamities; it was no longer habitable. However, Providence was not wanting for the reconstruction. The American Army offered help immediately. They helped repair the buildings and brought food and clothes in abundance. And, on the request of the local and provincial governments, boys from the street, orphans and old people who no longer had parents were received once more. The buildings were enlarged and those who were sheltered therein reached 360.³²

Conclusion

The Post-War development of the Congregation was very rapid. Indeed, the growth that the CSM presently shows is a witness to the richness of the Salesian Charism. In 1955, the Salesian Rector Major, Fr. Renato Zaggiotti, while having his canonical visit to Japan, remarked that the CSM is a succedaneous family, that testifies to the vital energies of the Salesian Society, which from its trunk has given life to new branches.³³ Fr. Cimatti, through the years, verified this word of Fr. Zaggiotti, and expresses it so in his letter destined to Fr. Cavoli on 7 July 1957.

“Dearest Fr. Antonio, excuse me for the delay. I believe that which refers to the Holy Father is without certain doubt on what has been done for the ‘Charitas’. It was then duty of the undersigned to give order and the advice to do; and to you the duty to execute. The actual results demonstrated that the Lord has blessed our obedience. *Deo gratias!* Let us pray for one another. Fr. V. Cimatti.

P.S. I have underlined the words which indicate the *duty to...*”³⁴

³¹ Cf *Ibid.*, pp. 93-96.

³² Cf *Ibid.*, pp. 97-100.

³³ A. CAVOLI, *Dall'Italia al Giappone*, p. 120.

³⁴ Lettera di don Cimatti a don Cavoli 7/7/1957.

The CSM is called to live a particular mission in the Salesian Family, that is, to proclaim the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus by living the words: "Go and tell the world, Blessed are the merciful," and by assimilating the spirit of St. John Bosco and of St. Vincent de Paul through charitable service to various people. When we try to reach the historical origins of the Congregation, we rediscover and value once more the true Salesian missionaries who were faithful to the Gospel and the spirit of St. John Bosco.