

## INTRODUCTION

It is certainly a pleasure to write this page of introduction to the Acts of the ACSSA Seminar of Hong Kong (December 2004), on the presence of the Salesian Work in East Asia, immediately following the celebration of the first centenary of the arrival of the Salesians in India (Bombay, 5 January 1906) and preceding the analogous celebration of the coming of the Salesians in Hong Kong/ Macao (13 February 1906). A century of history has indeed passed, but not in vain, because its consequences are still alive amidst us, “children of that history”, who now can go in search of the roots of the apostolic labour of our predecessors with instruments at our disposition.

With regards the first event, the Salesian India has already in its hands numerous local studies and two recent volumes on its first fifty years of history written by the specialist Joseph Thekkedath (*A History of the Salesians of Don Bosco in India from the beginning up to 1951-1952*, Bangalore 2005). With regards the second commemoration, the ACSSA seminar was intended to stimulate the study of the presence of the Salesians in the whole of East Asia, meaning not only China, but also Korea, the Philippines, Japan, Thailand, East Timor and Vietnam, even as the region awaits the publication of another expert, Carlo Socol, regarding the Salesian presence in China.

“Salesian Work” does not refer only to foundations by the Salesians of Don Bosco, but also to those started by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and by the numerous groups belonging to the Salesian Family, whether of local (Asian) or non-local (European) origin. In these two volumes containing the Acts of the Seminar of Hong Kong, we have about fifteen essays, of varying length and depth of analysis, whose value lies in their offering a first panorama of the origins and establishments of the Salesians in different Asian countries in a period of about fifty years: from the first presence in Macao (1906) to that in Korea (1954).

It is said, that books are the points of arrival of long researches; that they are the syntheses of previous intense studies and the conclusive results of many writers’ and researchers’ efforts. It can be said, however, that these two volumes of the ACSSA Hong Kong seminar are and simply intend to constitute the point of departure for a history that is still be written and to be told.

The apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* of 6 November 1999, born from the Synod of the Bishops for Asia celebrated in Rome in April-May 1998, reminded us that Asia is the land of birth of Jesus and of the Church, and that together with the ecclesial community spread in the world, the Church in Asia will cross the threshold of the Christian third millennium, contemplating with marvel how much God has done from the beginning up to the present, and strong in the knowledge that just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on European soil, in the second millennium on that of America and Africa, one could hope in the third millennium of gathering a great harvest of the faith in this continent so vast and alive: a continent inhabited by about two thirds of the earth's total population (India and China together constitute half of this), the great part of which are Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, with a number of Catholics which does not even arrive at 100,000,000 million, including the 55 million of the Philippines.

To the spread of the gospel message in Asia, which began on the day itself of Christ's birth, the Salesian Society, which grew in Italy the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has contributed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the re-awakening of missionary activity, the re-organization of the Propaganda Fide, the greater attention to the establishment of local churches, the works of education and charity which accompanied the preaching of the Good News.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first Salesian missionaries landed in China and educated generations of the young along the years. They committed themselves there and in the nearby countries to preach the Good News according to the charisma of Don Bosco. Their attempts to inculturate varied in success and failure. Their journey was often difficult not only because of the human deficiencies of individual missionaries, but also because they were sometimes unjustly considered foreigners to Asia and were identified with the colonial powers of the time.

Missionaries of great value (the likes of Fr. Carlo Braga, Fr. Gaetano Pasotti, Coadjutor Vincenzo Seneca, Fr. Antonio Cavoli, Fr. Erminio Rosetti, Fr. Archimede Martelli, Coadjutor Andrea Bragion, Sr. Elena Bottini, Sr. Letizia Begliatti, Sr. Maria Baldo) worked together with missionaries of modest capabilities to effect educative, religious and social works. They might not have reached the summit of fame of some of the missionaries in Latin America, but they attempted to adapt to the new

populations who learned from them ideas taught in Europe. True and authentic martyrs declared as such by the Church (Msgr. Luigi Versiglia and Fr. Callisto Caravario) or perhaps awaiting such recognition (the venerable Fr. Vincenzo Cimatti, the servant of God Fr. Carlo della Torre, Fr. Francisque Dupont) spent their daily existence together with humble priests, coadjutors and sisters in situations which threatened their freedom and in which often times they risked imprisonment for that same reason – that of the Gospel. They are responsible for the actual flowering of vocations of the Salesian Family in some countries of East Asia, as well as the re-launching of new works inside and outside of these nations.

The beginnings of such “undertaking”, which now arrive at the 100 or 70 or 50 years of existence in the different countries of East Asia, are here recalled like flashes of light by professional scholars and by simple enthusiasts of history who give us a brief account of the first Salesian works in East Asia. These beginnings, guided by a Divine Providence capable of writing straight on the crooked lines of human freedom – the event of the Salesian presence in the Philippines is a classical example – can not and must not be forgotten. Otherwise, the Salesians risk to deprive themselves of their own roots, and in a certain way, of the significance of their lives and actions. In the light of their past, they can enlighten the paths of their present and their future.

“The data exist”, the anticipations succulent. What is now needed is to complete the documentation, interpret the documents correctly, deepen the less-known and problematic issues, and write out a version according to scientific criterion which is greatly shared in the actual ecclesiological-cultural time.

ACSSA has given a modest contribution with this seminar of Hong Kong which has been preceded by analogous seminars held in Europe and Latin America: it has opened and indicated the way to professional historians who have now the task to write monographs, whether national and local. Society in general, the Church and the Salesian Family feel the need and have the right to pretend for these works in the near future.

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