



**SAC. Galdino Bardelli**

MISSIONARIO SALESIANO

ISPETTORIA M. AUSILIATRICE. CINA.

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My dear Confreres,

today there falls the first anniversary of the death of Fr. Galdino Bardelli, who was born at Angera (archdiocese of Milan) on October 28th 1883 and passed away in Hong Kong at 77 years of Salesian life, 69 of priesthood and 63 of missionary apostolate in this Salesian Province of China.

It seems that Divine Providence enjoys "having fun" with people who whole-heartedly trust in It. On October 28th 1982 Fr. Galdino completed his 99th year of age and started his 100th. According to Chinese traditional reckoning he was already a centenarian and so against the background of the "International Year of the Elderly" we organized a great celebration in his honour. Who would have imagined that before a fortnight had elapsed he would have concluded his earthly pilgrimage?

In this plan of Divine Providence I see an invitation to look at the demise of dear old Fr. Galdino as at a joyful return to the Home of the Father. According to Chinese custom the death of an elderly person is not a sad event and accordingly the liturgical colour of the vestments in the funeral services is red, the colour of festivities.

Thus allow me to describe for you the solemn celebrations of the 100th birthday and then Father's departure and funeral.

### **The 100th birthday celebrations.**

For two years Fr. Galdino had been a guest at the "Home for the Aged" managed by the Little Sisters of the Poor" because his original House had become a retreat house, which afforded little companionship to Father. The Sisters are real angels of goodness and Father was happy with them. He lived in a comfortable room with an altar which he used to celebrate holy mass till the very last day of his life.

On October 28th the good sisters and all the old folk of the Home celebrated the century of life of Fr. Galdino with songs, greetings and plenty of cakes. In the afternoon there arrived from Paris Fr. Bardelli's nephew Charles, son of his sister Elvira, accompanied by his wife and son Michael. They spent the whole evening with Father, chatting and singing with him in their own dialect.

In order to suit our confreres and friends invited to attend, we celebrated Father's birthday officially the following day October 29th. Many confreres, members of the Salesian Family, priests, religious and sisters assembled at the Home. H.L. the Bishop of Hong Kong Mons. J.B. Wu also took part, delivered a moving sermon and presided over the

benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Present was also Mons. C. Lemaire, M.E.P., a missionary in China for many years. Later in the evening we all went along to the floating Restaurant "Jumbo" for a fraternal agape. H.L. Bishop Wu as well as an elderly Vietnamese Bishop Mons. Anthony Thien, also a resident at the Home, were among the 200 guests attending. To avoid tiring Fr. Galdino we set a very simple program: a short address of greetings, a little singing and a few words by Fr. Galdino himself. The atmosphere was cheerful indeed. I felt it was a veritable "Eucharist", a spontaneous outpouring of gratitude to Almighty God for all the graces granted to Father during his long life as well as for the gift of Fr. Galdino to us.

### **The Demise and the Funeral.**

During the following two days I visited Father again. I shared with Mother Superior of the Home a feeling of surprise: while we were all tired after the busy days behind us, Father looked as fresh as a daisy.

However in early November the weather started changing. On the 9th Father was affected by an attack of bronchitis. The Sisters, some of whom are qualified nurses, on the advice of the physician, took special care of Father. On being notified I returned at once to Hong Kong from Macau where I was on a visit. Fr. Galdino looked very peaceful. At one time he smiled and said, "Alas, Alas: one hundred years can be enough, can't they?"

Some confreres from the nearby House came over to visit him. We did not think his condition to be serious, but the Sisters warned us that at that age even a slight bronchitis could be fatal.

In the evening at 5 p.m. I administered the Sacrament of the Sick to Father, who was surrounded by all the Sisters of the Home. He followed the rite devoutly and repeated the prayers I whispered into his ears.

The catarrh in his throat made breathing difficult and extracting it caused the patient great pain. He was helped with a supply of oxygen. We hoped he might be able to sleep and rest during the night, but soon realized that his strength was rapidly failing.

At about midnight I noticed that his finger-tips were bluish and the hands already cold. As catarrh was being extracted, there appeared no reaction. His heavy breathing went on till 2.00 a.m., then it grew lighter and lighter and eventually ceased at 2.35 of November 10th.

I celebrated a requiem mass at once in the room where Father had passed away. In the morning a Jesuit Father, who lived in the room adjacent to that of Father, celebrated a second requiem mass, which was



attended by all the elderly guests of the Home. Before midday the Vietnamese Bishop Mons. Thien offered a third holy mass in the same room attended by all the Sisters of the Community.

In the evening of November 10th the remains of Fr. Galdino returned to "his" house at Shaukiwan, where he had spent his last years from 1952 to 1980. The confreres came to do homage and to pray. On the 11th in the evening a solemn requiem mass was concelebrated at St. Anthony's where the late Father had been the first Rector for three years. Present was also Mons. Lemaire, M.E.P. After another requiem mass at the Home for the Aged, in the morning of the 12th Father's body was carried to the cemetery. H.L. Bishop Wu presided over the funeral rites in person.

### **Father Galdino's Family and Salesian Vocation.**

Fr. Galdino had four sisters and two brothers: he was the last but one of the seven children. Battista, his junior by four years, is still there, is well and looks like emulating his brother in longevity. The two daughters of Battista, Maria Luisa and Angela, in the past ten years had kept up affectionate correspondence with their missionary uncle. It was Angela who supplied me with the valuable information about dear old Fr. Galdino. Some time ago the latter was asked by a confrere to jot down a few details about his own life which he called: "Historical Statements". It was obvious that they were intended to help the confrere who would write his mortuary letter. I will make ample use of them.

The "Statements" start off like this: "I was born of poor but fervently catholic parents." This may sound like a stereotyped expression, but in the case of Fr. Galdino it certainly is not. Among the very few documents he kept we find a letter written by his father after the young man had left home to start his novitiate at Schio in 1904.

Here are a few passages: "Do not worry about us, dear son, because, as you well know, I am not very much interested in the present world". "As regards us, do not worry; we are well; do whatever the Lord inspires you to do; may He ever accompany you".

"I will pray hard that Almighty God may accept our offering".

It must be noticed that by then Peter, the elder brother, had already left for the United States to look for work (it seems without much success) so that Galdino was practically the eldest male child of the family. Besides gladly giving up a very desirable helping hand, father was also making a keenly felt sacrifice.

"Now who knows when you will see us again; you certainly do not. Well, God willing, we shall meet again; anyway we shall keep united with our



hearts."

"As regards mother, by begging her to forgive you you made her weep, because she was unable to recall any untoward behaviour on your part, except perhaps some boyish pranks which had long been forgotten."

Fr. Galdino had added a few words of his own to the letter: "The Good Lord could not have granted me better parents. I thank you, my God!"

Most of us knew Fr. Galdino as an elderly confrere. It is interesting to know something about his teens and youth. His so called "Statements" are so sketchy that we just copy them as they are:

"After attending school, at twelve I went to work in Arona in a printing-shop as an apprentice. Mother got me in the habit of serving holy mass every morning at five and of travelling to work by boat. Later on a brother-in-law of mine sent me to Milan to work in a machine-shop. One of my very good sisters introduced a saintly priest to me, who used to hear confessions in the cathedral church of Milan. Another sister of mine who worked for some benefactors of the local Salesians obtained a free place for me at their School. I was enrolled as a "Figlio di Maria" (a late vocation) and so was able to follow a regular four year middle school course. On graduation I was approached by my saintly spiritual director who asked whether I intended to enter the seminary or to join the Salesians. I opted for the latter way of life. He concluded, "Go ahead without ever turning back". "I made my novitiate at Schio (near Vicenza) (1904-1905) and had Fr. Terrone as my Master. I made my first profession there at Schio and the Perpetual one at Valsalice in the presence of Blessed Fr. Michael Rua in 1908."

Such sketchy notes create the impression that although Fr. Galdino's vocation might have been materially speaking a demanding one because of the hardships of poverty, from the spiritual point of view it had been protected, easy and devoid of danger. Actually it was not so. More than once he recounted to me that while working as an apprentice at the machine shop, his virtue had been seriously threatened by some fellow-apprentices of his. But then the "lamb" had turned "lion" and had fought back bravely. Together with a sound spirit of piety he had been endowed by the Lord with a strong temper; those who knew "young" Galdino bear ample witness to this.

### **His Life in the Mission.**

Good old Fr. Bardelli showed remarkable generosity and fortitude when he left for the missions in 1919 after the first world war. His health was in such a poor state that the then Rector Major Fr. P. Albera doubted

"whether this gracile confrere will ever be able to cross the oceans and reach the mission lands".

The fact is that he outlived all the fellow-missionaries who set out with him. He used to tell the story with obvious delight.

Twice had Fr. Galdino jotted down a few pages (actually three) of very "scanty remembrances" in which he sketchily described his years of missionary life in the diocese of Shiu Chow, whose Pastor was Mons. L. Versiglia, the future Blessed Martyr.

Perusing the lines left by Father, one feels that actually he tells one single episode and summarises in a few words his nine years of strictly missionary life (six at Lok Chong and three at Lin Chow).

"I will not describe my missionary work on behalf of over 700 Christians, nor will I speak of the satisfactions or of the hardships, which were not few, particularly in my journeys on the river that leads to Lin Chow; I will also overlook the dangers caused by civil war and piracy in later years."

On the occasion of the recent beatification of Mons. L. Versiglia and Fr. C. Caravario we were able to come to know a little better the self-sacrificing nay the heroic spirit of our missionaries.

An added difficulty was the language: as soon as he reached the mission, Father was sent to his assigned station at once, while his fellow-missionaries were able to spend a few months in Shiu Chow to study the local language. He often used to tell us how he had managed to deliver his first sermon at Christmas, all made up of gestures and mimicry.

In an yet even more sketchy way Father disposes of the other half century of his own life by simply stating, "Then I moved to Macau and later to Hong Kong." Yet he was the first Rector of St. Anthony's chapel (1929-1932) later on to be St. Anthony's church, Superior of the House of Formation (1934-1935) and master of novices (1945-48).

Only once did Fr. Galdino revisit his native town when he returned to Italy in 1929 as a delegate to the General Chapter.

His cousin Mr. Giulio Bardelli assures us that even today people still remember his visit vividly. Father is described as agile, hasty and almost hurried because "he was all the time busy and taken up by a thousand ideas."

"Above all he showed deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin, the dear "Madonna della Riva". On arriving at Angera, he would immediately hasten to her shrine where he celebrated holy mass calmly, setting aside his habitual haste."

## **A meaningful episode**

Fr. Galdino concentrated his memories in one single episode: this whets our curiosity to know it and stimulates our desire to discover its significance.

The episode is told in plentiful details and in a tone of enthusiasm: it deals with a beautiful statue of Our Lady Immaculate, shipped over from Italy care of Fr. Caviglia, solemnly carried to the village of Pat Heung and set in the church dedicated to Her. It was Mons. Versiglia himself who blessed it while Fr. C. Braga with his brass-band lent colour to the occasion. The feastday had no parallel in the history of the diocese. Fr. Galdino concludes with some sad but restrained remarks: "When the Reds reached the place, the statue was removed and placed in the sacresty. I have no further news about it."

Nearing the end of his century of life, our old patriarch bears in his mind and heart his dear mission district in mainland China, where a beautiful statue of Our Lady Immaculate lies uncared for, the object of fervent devotion in the old days and waiting for better times, when the faithful will be free once again to express their filial feelings to their dear Mother and Queen.

## **A spiritual portrait.**

The above-mentioned episode provides us with an insight into the spiritual figure of Fr. Bardelli. Love for and trust in God and his heavenly Mother: an attitude that was truly filial, a feeling of joy, hope and anticipation of Heaven. I believe that these can be described as the characteristic marks of Father's life.

### **1) Love for and trust in God and his Heavenly Mother.**

How interesting and charming it is to notice in a very old person "the heart of a child". Obviously I am not speaking of the usual fact that our old folk tend to become "children" again. This is not the case with Father. Rarely does a very old person keep so alert and fresh of mind as Fr. Galdino did. To the very last days he insisted on attending to his own personal cleanliness and on making his own bed. He used to read books, updated to Vatican II level; he used to be witty and pleasantly cunning; nobody ever managed to "take him in"! He never was an old dotard; he was "a child" by personal Gospel-like choice: the spirit of sonship.

He used to speak of God and of the Bless Mother as of the most present Persons in his life, he trusted, Them and felt completely at peace, which he used to transmit to other.



He showed his spirit of sonship also to his superior, fifty years his junior. At the conclusion of my visits he would ask for my blessing and insisted on kissing my hand.

Old age often brings along "fixed ideas". But when Father knew his Superior's will, he would welcome it with admirable faith, so that the good Sisters would let me know their plans in his regard so that he might readily accept them.

2) the spirit of sonship is the source of unending, explosive joy and cheer. Father possessed a very weak voice, but he sang with great zest. Heaven was familiar to him and its bliss often anticipated. After-life to him was the natural continuation of the present one. With his very life he expressed the idea his good father had mentioned in his letter: "I am not unduly interested in this world!"

In perfect harmony with the spirit of the Little Sisters, with whom he spent the last few years of his lifetime, Father used to look at death with serenity. On the other hand, with St. Francis de Sales, he did not ask for it although his old age was growing heavier and heavier. He joyfully accepted everything from the hands of God and offered up everything to Him through the hands of the Blessed Mother. He prayed the Holy Rosary many times a day and asked Our Lady to take care of the many intentions he prayed for.

My dear Confreres, I have been rather late in gathering and jotting down for you and for myself these simple memories of this wonderful confrere of ours, very old of age but very youthful of spirit.

It is our earnest hope that from Heaven he will lead us on the way to everlasting youth.

Yours in D.B.,

Fr. Joseph Zen,  
former provincial superior  
of Fr. Bardelli.

Data for the necrology:

Fr. Galdino Bardelli,

b. Angera (Italy) October 28th 1883

d. Hong Kong 10th November 1982

at 99 years of age,

77 years of Salesian life

69 years of priesthood

63 years in China.