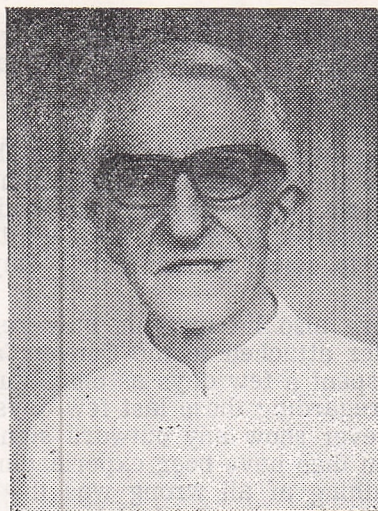


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Makati

January 25, 1976

Dear Confreres:

It was precisely as the solemn celebrations marking the first Centennial of the Salesian Missions were being held in Turin that Divine Providence decided, in His own mysterious plan, to recall home to receive the well earned reward our own beloved Salesian Missionary

Fr. VINCENT RICARDONE

in the 78th year of his age, 57th of religious profession and 52nd of priesthood.

He had been invited by the Rector Major himself to travel to Rome and Turin and there participate in the celebrations as a qualified representative of all the veteran missionaries, those who had spent more than fifty years labouring on the mission fields.

When the matter was first mentioned to him Fr. Vincent's sense of deep humility led him to insist and decline this honor; it was only after much persuasion that he accepted and on October 3rd last he began that trip that was to take him from the Far East to Rome little thinking that the return part of the ticket would never be used. The sense of unease that he felt was somewhat softened by the fact that in travelling to Rome he was in the company of Fr. Provincial who was also going to Rome to take part in a convention of all the Provincials of the English-speaking Region. For me this was a God-given opportunity as it enabled me to obtain a more personal experience of what I had already been told regarding the sterling character of Fr. Vincent; I was able to see with what evident joy he was returning to his native Italy, especially to Rome on the occasion of the Holy Year; at the same time it was also very clear that he was filled with trepidation, even fear, as to what the outcome of the trip might be. He seemed to be aware even then of what nobody else suspected; but even he was not then conscious of the

seriousness of the malady he was carrying with him from Manila to Rome a malady that was far more serious and advanced than anyone suspected.

Upon arrival in Italy another shock awaited him when he was told over the telephone of the death of his only remaining brother, Dr. Vittorio. Upon hearing this sad news he immediately hastened to his native Mirabello Monferrato to be present with his relatives and to celebrate the Thirty Days' Mind Mass.

There also he met his only remaining sister, Felicita, a Salesian Sister attached to the Convent at S. Salvatore (Alessandria); there he spent a few days as chaplain. From a letter that his sister wrote us regarding those last few days we learned that on no occasion did he ever show any outward signs of the terrible sufferings he must even then have been experiencing: the only indication that there was anything at all wrong was the punctuality with which he took the medicine which he had brought with him from Manila. To all those who inquired after his health he invariably had the one stock answer: "Everyone treats me like a prince." And yet he was ill at ease; there was one thing worrying him all the time; he wanted to make arrangements to return immediately to the Philippines, ready even at that late juncture to skip participation in the Celebrations of the Missionary Centennial; this even led him to write me then involved in the Provincials' Meetings in Rome. The letter is dated 17th October and reads in part:

"Fr. Provincial, use your good offices to enable me to return right now to the Philippines; here the cold is terrible; I have absolutely nothing to do here; and you yourself well know how much they need me in the Parish of San Ildefonso. . . ."

Not content with having written this letter no sooner had he returned to Turin from his native Mirabello than he continued to insist in all quarters that he be given permission to return to Manila on Nov. 8th, even before the Centennial Celebrations.

The strong emotions he had been subjected to, together with the fatigue caused by the long flight from Manila to Rome, the change of climate after so many years spent in the Far East, the exceptional cold of that late autumn: all these conspired together to facilitate the rapid advance of the enemy already so firmly established in his weak stomach. But he permitted himself to be persuaded and to delay his return until after the Centennial Celebrations.

But God had other plans. On the night that separated Saturday Nov. 8th from the morning of Nov. 9th he began to have a continuous series of vomiting attacks accompanied by acute pains in the stomach. The Superiors of the Mother House rushed him to the nearby Cottolengo Hospital; a battery of the best doctors prepared to make an emergency operation. It did not take them long to discover the root cause of the trouble; they also realized that it was too late to do anything: the cancer had spread far and wide.

What follows is gleaned from a letter written us by Fr. G. Giliberti, the Rector of the Mother House:

"Everyday I made it a point of visiting him; and on these occasions I was invariably accompanied by some other confreres almost always other missionaries who had come to Turin for the same reason as Fr. Vincent to take part in the Mission Celebrations. In addition to my visits he was also visited by — among others — Frs. G. Scrivo, B. Tohill, R. Pilla, M. Bellido and also by Mons. Carretto who brought him the special blessings of the Rector Major. These visits of both Superiors and confreres gave him great spiritual joy; he was seen to be deeply moved by so many signs of esteem and affection. I also made it a point of informing his nun sister in Monferrato of these developments, and she was able to come to Turin and spend the last few days by his bedside.

It must have been about six in the morning of Nov. 13th that I had an emergency call by telephone from the Hospital giving me to understand that Fr. Vincent that very morning had been through a very serious crisis and it seemed as if the heart was becoming very weak. I rushed over at once and administered the Anointing of the Sick, in this function assisted by Fr. Peter Bongiovanni, Professor at the Crocetta, and at that time himself also confined in the same ward because of heart trouble. From that time on right up to the end we saw to it that there were always some confreres watching with him; also continually present was his sister, other relatives and always some confreres; that night he seemed to be resting peacefully, all the time assisted by a Salesian priest; and it was in that peaceful sleep that he handed back his beautiful soul to His heavenly Father: it was four o'clock in the morning of November 14th.

Italian law did not permit the transfer of the corpse to the Mother House until the next morning, Saturday 15th. His funeral took place together with that of yet another veteran missionary who had died the previous day in the infirmary of the Mother House, Fr. Eusebio De Angeli, who had spent his missionary days in Latin America. And so Fr. Vincent joined him in the Church of St. Francis de Sales and from there both corpses were carried processionaly into the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians."

We are grateful to Fr. Giliberti for these details. Fr. Tohill also wrote us about the funeral and from his letter we glean other details so as to round off what we have written above. Fr. Tohill was at pains to convince us that the Superiors had left no stone unturned in doing all they could to give a worthy funeral to our dear Fr. Vincent who died so far from his own dear Province of the Philippines. He writes in part:

"On Saturday morning I went with Archbishop Ferrando, Frs. Giliberti, Alexander Ma and Bro. Kapczar to the 'obitorio' to say the last prayers and accompany the corpse to the Oratory.

In the Church of St. Francis de Sales Mons. Castillo gave the last blessing over the two corpses. That of Fr. Ricaldone and the other of Fr. Eusebio De Angeli (86 years old) who had worked in Ecuador (1927-39). The double funeral was most impressive. Mother General and some Councilors were present. Fr. Scrivo and I assisted Mons. Castillo; Mons. Obelar also concelebrated; Bishops Ferrando, Marchesi, Baroi, and Carretto assisted. The concelebrants most of them missionaries, were very many — I suppose at least 50 but probably more. Mons. Castillo preached a fine panegiric. The whole function was dedicated to **all our deceased Salesians and FMA** who had worked in the Missions. The function was very impressive and meaningful and much felt by all. A coach brought us to the Turin cemetery where Frs. Kirschner, Sacchi, Ma, two Filipino Brothers I had called from Rome, Bro. Kapczar and myself paid our last respects to dear Fr. Vincent. I had given the Good Night Friday evening to a packed Church (St. Francis De Sales) . . .”

In addition to these details regarding the last days of Fr. Vincent in Turin and the final triumphal funeral and burial Fr. Tohill wanted to show us all how much he personally appreciated Fr. Vincent who had been his teacher and Superior in the days of the China mission. Fr. Tohill summarizes this way:

“I feel that his purgatory will be very, very short. Any defects he had were insignificant. His virtue was granitic; he was a thorough Salesian. I will be forever grateful to him for all he did to me as a young Salesian. He was loved by all of us students of philosophy and theology. May God rest his great soul, and may the Philippines which he so dearly loved soon have many Salesians of the calibre of Don Vincenzo.”

As a matter of fact all those who have had the good fortune to know Fr. Vincent would heartily agree in this appreciation; one and all are convinced that Fr. Vincent — and the same applies to his brother Igino who also worked for many years in this same Province and who also died suddenly when on furlough in his native Italy — was a born Salesian, both grew up and were educated in those christian virtues so characteristic of that family that binds them worthily to the unforgettable Rector Major, also their uncle, Fr. Peter Ricaldone.

Vincent was born on Feb. 27th 1897 at Mirabello Monferrato. Of their five children the Ricaldone parents were happy in keeping with a family tradition to offer no less than four to the Salesian Family: 3 sons to the Salesian Congregation, Luigi, Vincent and Igino, and a daughter Felicita to the Salesian Sisters, the only member of the family still alive and presently attached to the community at San Salvatore (Alessandria).

The early years of his religious life were spent in the formation houses in Penango and Foglizzo. Having been ordained to the priesthood on February 19th 1923 he was chosen almost immediately to be one

of the very first missionaries to go to China and he worked there with exemplary zeal up to 1952. Then Divine Providence once again called upon him to be a pioneer this time together with other missionaries who had just been expelled from Communist China he was asked to go to the Philippines and there establish the Congregation. He was one of the very first Salesians to come to this Province that this year 1976 will celebrate the 25th anniversary of our activity as a Congregation and more precisely in the town of Tarlac. Of the time spent in China very little is known: in a way it is unfortunate that those early missionaries were so busy saving souls that they never took time out to record precisely what and how they operated. However we are still fortunate in having at our disposal the recollections of another pioneer of those days, Fr. Peter Garbero himself first a student under Fr. Ricaldone, subsequently a companion in the field of the Lord and always an ardent admirer. He remembers Fr. Vincent especially for his goodness, his obedience and his spirit of sacrifice. The first mission field where Fr. Vincent laboured was Nam Shiung. Those were days of civil strife. And yet Fr. Vincent was able to be friendly with one and all Red and non-Red; christian and pagan; his secret was his innate goodness and his peaceful manner of behaving. He had taken to heart the suggestions of St. Francis of Sales and preferred to use honey instead of vinegar. Not that vinegar was not occasionally called for. Difficulties there were and a plenty; and yet we know that all cooperated with him in his undertakings. He was never a very brilliant linguist but he did the best he could and the Holy Spirit on more than one occasion seems to have been more than ordinarily involved. And he was also so devoted to St. Francis of Assisi like whom he was always an instrument of peace. This characteristic of sweetness, and balance led Mons. Versiglia to appoint him the Rector of the very first Minor Seminary established at Ho Sai near Shiu Chow, a post he did not fill for long as he was called to become the Rector of the Salesian House of Formation in Hong Kong, a post that he was to fill both in Hong Kong and later in Shanghai and once again in Hong Kong after the Pacific Conflict.

Upon his arrival here in the Philippines he dedicated himself to the priestly apostolate with exemplary zeal and untiring effort first in Tarlac, and later in Mandaluyong. His was the distinction of being the first Novice Master in these Islands, office that he filled until 1963. After a very short period of rest in Italy we find him back in the Philippines. His new assignment was that of Confessor in Victorias. We are indebted to Fr. Garbero for the following information. Fr. Vincent was not overly happy with the idea of having to proceed to Victorias. He unburdened his soul to Fr. Garbero:

"Of course I'll obey; but as you know, down there the climate is very damp; and then to think that at my age I'll still have to try to learn a new dialect: honestly, I just can't see how I'll be able to manage."

And Divine Providence soon rectified everything: it was Fr. Garbero who proceeded to Victorias and Fr. Vincent took up his post as Confessor in Makati, a post that he still retained at the time of his

untimely death. And what a wonderful confessor he made for the thousands of boys and adults, who, strange as it may seem today, wanted to take advantage of his dedication in this so delicate field; and not just here in the school chapel but also in the attached San Ildefonso parish with its approximately 50,000 souls. And as if this was not enough for one man he was always ready and willing no matter what the time or what the weather to give himself when called upon no matter by whom or where. This availability of his explains in part the deep appreciation he enjoyed even with outside communities both male and female.

Fr. Vincent was always very much at home here in the pleasant climate of the Philippines; this does not mean that he never experienced any difficulties. His advanced age and the rough tenor of life to which he had to submit in the years of the China mission soon began to show; especially troublesome was his stomach which was always a source of uneasiness even to the extent of necessitating several blood transfusions. But no matter what the state of his health he was always dependable in the different tasks entrusted to his capable attention and it is only now that we are really beginning to realize the extent of these manifold tasks, now that he is no longer around. He was a Salesian through and through, scrupulously punctual in all his undertakings, no matter where the call came from; he had very clear ideas and his doctrine was both traditional and sure; he was gifted with an extraordinary sense of salesian fatherliness and fraternal brotherhood, but always tempered with an exquisite salesian sense in all his manifestations; and this same salesian attachment he tried by every means at his disposal to instill in one and all whether in private or in public. We had become so accustomed to his many interventions, to which we always looked forward with a deep sense of expectancy and sincere pleasure whether they were made on the occasion of entertainments, Good Nights or Salesian encounters. And we knew beforehand that the Introduction would inevitably be something in this vein:

"In Chapter x, of Volume x of the BM, on page x, we can read how Don Bosco said this, or did this, or had this dream, etc. . . ."

And then he would proceed first to narrate, then to apply the anecdote or whatever to the present-day situation.

Without a doubt it was this salesian — maybe better Bosconian — orientation of his that irradiated all through his whole Salesian life and that became the dominant characteristic of the gigantic figure of our unforgettable Fr. Vincent Ricaldone. To him might be applied the words of the Baptist referred to Christ: He must increase, I must decrease. For him Don Bosco was the life of his life. Don Bosco was always on his lips; the BMs were always in his hands; when he was still teaching he insisted that his students read the BMs so that they might be initiated into the first steps of the Salesian Preventive Method. He was a firm believer in the theory that without knowledge of Don Bosco it was impossible to be a Salesian at all, least of all a good Salesian. He wasn't a very

eloquent speaker, but he was a very substantial preacher. And the fare he distributed to his young listeners was always sure to be good Salesian nourishment. And the approach was almost always the same, based on the BMs, or else those splendid salesian circular letters that he seems to have memorized.

And yet nothing was left to chance; nothing was left to the last minute; everything was already there, written down on index cards and then they were read and his listeners came to know more or less how long the sermon was going to be from the ever-decreasing volume of cards. But Fr. Vincent became conscious of that and then he introduced a change to try and disconcert his audience; the ruse of shuffling the cards; occasionally the cards got all mixed up in the shuffle but in spite of that the ideas always remained crystal clear. And this was a privilege he rarely, if ever ceded to others. He was responsible for the formation of the future salesians and he made it a point of seeing to it that they understood, appreciated and remembered in the hope that at some later date they might also implement in their apostolate in the salesian houses the saving system of Don Bosco. What we have just said about his sermons and Good Nights and Conferences is also applicable to his lessons (he taught Latin and Pedagogy): always punctual, always prepared, always exacting, yet at the same time so considerate, so understanding, so ready to close an eye, so eager to forgive, so ready to offer a second chance especially when he was convinced — and it was so easy to convince him in this — that the individual was really trying his best even if success delayed somewhat in coming.

But, at least here in the Philippines, Fr. Vincent will be best remembered for his work in the confessional. And here what words could adequately describe his punctuality, his dedication, his patience? Maybe this was an overflow of his life of intense prayer. And maybe it was also his prayer life that made him such a good listener, not merely a good listener however, but a willing, gentle, accepting listener; well prepared in mind and body, conscientious to a fault, always on time, never in a hurry to depart, never impatient or restless; he was fully aware that it was especially in the confessional that he represented the Church, the reconciling Church and he did so with a deep faith in Christ's presence especially through the reconciling process. Maybe more than others he was convinced that it was Jesus and Jesus alone who saved but he also was convinced that his cooperation was needed and so he always did the very best he could even in spite of his rather limited language possibilities: the crowds that flocked to his confessional speak eloquently of how his faith was acknowledged and appreciated and reciprocated by big and small alike. And even in the confessional he was the authentic salesian; his attachment to Don Bosco was most admirable. How he suffered upon learning of certain changes introduced here and there; he found it very hard to give his approval and blessings to a world that seemed to have strayed somewhat from the genuine salesian tradition as understood, taught and required by our heroic superiors of the not too distant past. Many a salesian found his attachment rather naive, out-dated, old-fashioned, exaggerated: these and similar accusations would never make him lose any sleep because there was one thing and only one thing that

really mattered as far as he was concerned and that was FIDELITY TO DON BOSCO and no one could ever say that he was in any way deficient in that respect.

Today the name of Fr. VINCENT RICALDONE is already encribed in the Golden Book of the Salesian Congregation; that book is not the Elenco, the book that contains the names of all the salesians presently living in the Congregation; rather it is the Salesian necrology. Here we have the list of all those salesians who began and ended their lives in the Congregation; and here we find them, side by side real authentic saints even martyrs who discovered holiness and their perfect fulfillment in the observance of our Constitutions.

Dear Confreres, even if Divine Providence has not decreed that we here in the Philippines should still possess the mortal remains of Fr. Vincent Ricaldone to be placed side by side those of that other Salesian giant that was Fr. Charles Braga and who now rests in our little salesian cemetery in the house of formation in Canlubang, nevertheless we must ever keep alive the memory of this wonderful confrere, one of the very first to come to work in this Province. And out of a deep sense of gratitude, we shall continue to pray fervently for his eternal repose. And this is what I would now invite all of you to do; at the same time let us all together invoke the Lord and the Immaculate Help of Christians to send many vocations of the calibre of Fr. Vincent to this dear land so blessed by God, where the Christian faith is so deeply rooted. It is from here that these same zealous future missionaries should go forth carrying with them the Gospel that like the Rising Sun will scatter the darkness of paganism that unfortunately still rules tyrannically in the whole of East Asia.

It would be impossible to bring this letter to a close without first expressing our deepest fraternal gratitude to the Very Rev. Rector Major, to all the members of the Superior Council, to the Most Rev. Salesian Bishops present in Turin for the Celebrations of the Mission Centennial, as also to the Very Rev. Director and confreres of the Mother House the relatives of Fr. Vincent, the Doctors and staff of the St. Peter's Infirmary of the Cottolengo Hospital for all their solicitous care and concern, spiritual assistance, visits, etc. performed with so much affection, care and concern for our dear Fr. Vincent. The Lord will most certainly reward them one and all for so much charity and brotherly love.

Please also say a prayer for this Province and for the one who professes himself.

Yours affectionately in Don Bosco,

JOSE CARBONELL LLOPIS
Provincial

Fr. Vincent Ricaldone, born at Mirabello Monferrato, on February 27, 1897, died in Turin (Italy) on November 14, 1975 at 78 years of age, 57 of religious profession and 52 of priesthood.