

REV. FR. MICHAEL SUPPO

St. Louis School, Third St., Hong Kong.

17th May 1973.

My dear Confreres,

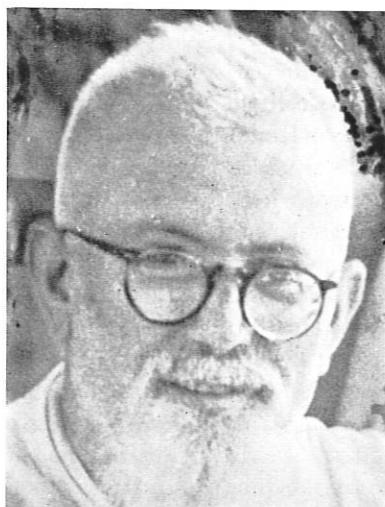
It is my sad duty to announce to you the death of one of our greatest Salesian missionaries in China—Fr. Michael Suppo.

Fr. Suppo was the personification of punctuality. When he failed to turn up for the First Meditation on Monday, 13th November 1972, glances of anxiety were exchanged. Our worst fears were confirmed on my going up to his bedroom. There he lay, already cold in death. R.I.P.

Serene and peaceful, his arms folded across his breast, Fr. Suppo had passed away to God. It was surely as he would have wished—quietly, without causing disturbance to anybody.

The funeral — incidentally paid for by Mr. Yao Ling Sun O.B.E., a close friend of Fr. Suppo's—was a veritable triumph: present were representatives of all the Religious Orders, past pupils from Shanghai, Hong Kong, Macau, and from our former Mission Territory of Shiu Chow, with their wives and families, teachers and pupils from our schools in Hong Kong and Macau. The cemetery at Happy Valley was packed with people mourning the passing of a great priest who had been to them Father, Teacher, Friend. At the grave-side officiated a personal friend and admirer, H.E. Mgr. Francis Hsu, Bishop of Hong Kong.

Over seventy years ago, on 20th October 1920, Fr. Suppo was born in Pianezza, a countryside near Turin. His good parents, Lawrence and Adela Reymander, had him baptised the following day, and confirmed nine years later on 22nd January 1911. Theirs must have been a very healthy sense of goodness. For their son, Michael, grew up strong and robust, keen and zealous for what was right and good. That



Treueid, so characteristic of him, he surely grew into from his mother in the best of Germany's traditions.

His father was in the building trade, and was a man who took pride in his work well done. Mr. Suppo had, besides Michael, another son and a daughter. These he hoped would make their way as well in the world as he had. When Michael felt the Call in another direction—to the priesthood—he strongly opposed him. This was all to the good training of the missionary son, destined for so many trials in his loyalty to high ideals.

Michael completed his Primary schooling in Pianezza. Then he did a year in the Juniorate of the La Salle Brothers at Grugliasco near Turin. The Brothers were hoping he would presently decide to join them. However

that was, he went next to the La Salle Technical Industrial School in Turin for three years. From there he went out to work.

Even in those early times he knew better than to let the grass grow under his feet. While working during the day, he had no intention of letting his mind go fallow or of passing up good opportunities. At night after work he attended evening classes; and at the end of four years, he took out his Diploma in Business Management.

His father's opposition remaining obdurate, Michael could not yet follow his vocation. He was a minor, unable to exercise his freedom of choice. So he bided his time, taking up employ in a Bank. It was indicative of him that he was soon promoted to Manager of a small branch of this Bank outside the city.

From his place in the Bank he was called up for military service. This he did in Bologna for the duration of one year or a year and a half.

The Archbishop at the time was all out for Catholic Action: the times had grown dangerous for Italy and her youth. With the Archbishop's good encouragement, the soldier Suppo with some staunch comrades founded a Catholic Action Group for young men under arms. This was to entail some ugly encounters, and these young men knew it. In fact, Fr. Suppo bore a scar at the back of his neck from a knifing on one such encounter.

His military training over, Michael was no longer a minor. He could decide for himself; and he did so. On 23rd October 1923 he entered the Cardinal Cagliero Missionary Institute of Ivrea. Only in one subject did he find himself at a handicap: that was Latin. He was placed in a special class where he was given his head to brûler le pavé. This he did with a will, and was ready for the Clothing Ceremony on 5th October 1924 in the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, at the hands of the Venerable Fr. Philip Rinaldi.

Of Ivrea he cherished fond memories, and some cheering words of Fr. Rinaldi he loved to quote. Throughout the year there he had been put helping the Prefect, who at the time happened to be the great Fr. Grandis, Provincial emeritus of Mexico. Owing to some ailment caught in Mexico, this holy priest was unable to celebrate Mass, till towards the close of his life Fr. Rinaldi told him to rebegin celebrating. With the command came his cure.

Two days after Clothing, Michael Suppo with a group of seven companions left Genoa for his novitiate in China and for his life's work there. On a Sunday in the first week of December their ship came to dock at Hong Kong. The P.I.M.E. Fathers of the Cathedral welcomed them to the Bishop's House there: a fine gesture of generosity—for the place was half demolished.

The following day the young group were down in Macau. A day or two later, they were accompanied by Fr. Canazei and Fr. Braga to Canton. From there Fr. Braga brought them by train to Shiu Chow where they met up with their Novice Master, Fr. Lareno, and the other youngsters from Italy who had arrived at the beginning of the year. At Ho Sai across the river they settled into their novitiate and passed

some months in holy serenity. On the greater solemnities they would go to Mgr. Versiglia's pro-cathedral to serve at the religious functions. The good Bishop called them "his canons".

The period 1925-27 was a murky one for China. The nationalistic agitation was turbulent with its ominous overtones of xenophobia and Soviet communism. Mgr. Versiglia thought it prudent to send the clerics back to the safety of Macau. Those of the studentate left on 29th January. The novices, he hoped, could stay on and last out their twelve months of novitiate at Ho Sai. Events, however, took a turn for the worse; and the novices had to be sent back also to Macau.

Their journey down is worth recording. The feast of the Assumption past, they prepared to move out bag and baggage. It was the time of the organized Boycott against Hong Kong and Macau. A providential delay had the train steam into Canton in the dark of night. The station had been full of rampaging coolies up from Hong Kong. Happily for the novices, these were now stretched out asleep, unaware of the passengers in transit.

The steamship service between Canton and Macau being suspended, a good Christian boatman well known to the missionaries rowed the novices over to the Shekki lorch. Once aboard the lorch, they were safe as far as Shekki where the local missionary, Fr. Wieczorek, met them and put them up for the night. True enough, the British and French gunboats, keeping guard over the Franco-British Concession at Sha Min, had trained their searchlights on the boatfull of novices as it was being rowed to the lorch off the Concession; but that was all.

The following morning the novices were back on the lorch, now accompanied by the good Fr. Wieczorek. Their next stop, they thought, would be Macau. However, this was not to be. Because of the Boycott, they found themselves abruptly halted at Tsin Shan. To get within reach of Macau, they should have a special pass. This none of them had. Even Fr. Wieczorek had only some sort of passport.

Their next move was to try and slip in by way of the fields through the Porta do Cerco. A group of coolies saw their intent, and lost

no time in blocking their way with a menacing show of bamboo poles and howling in wild indignation. Nothing daunted, Fr. Wieczorek went boldly up, showed his passport, and protested in no uncertain terms. But all to no avail. At last, along came a man of some standing in the local community. A short discussion ensued; and our novices went happily on to Macau.

At the orphanage of the Immaculate Conception there the eight novices settled into their novitiate again. Four of them were eventually professed. Of these, three persevered: Fr. Suppo, Mgr. Arduino, Fr. Rassiga.

Times were hard; and the personnel, scarce. Little to wonder at then that the newly professed cleric, Suppo, was sent up to Shanghai straightaway as Assistant, studying at the same time the masterful panoramas of Philosophy Fr. Garelli found time to put before him. It was surely this fine mastery that made of Fr. Suppo the incomparable teacher he turned out to be. We Salesian clerics who were privileged to have him as our Prefect of Studies remember well the awe and admiration we had for him. There seemed to be no subject in which he was not expert. He spoke and read Chinese fluently, with a fine mastery in at least two dialects. He gave us crash courses in Italian Literature, German Literature, Chinese Literature, and English Literature. Whenever any teacher was absent, he would stand in for him and make the subject seem ever so much easier to understand.

His stay, however, in Shanghai was short: 1925-1927. Hostilities of a communistic nature were being provoked in the city against the foreigners, against the British in particular and the Japanese. Ugly developments were threatening to loom large for all non-Chinese. Our House was forced by the circumstances to close down; and the cleric Suppo was sent down to Macau to take up Theology.

His studies in Theology went far afield—in the physical sense at least. Begun in Macau, the theologate was later transferred to the Casa Gomes within the compound of St. Louis School, a new work but a very old building the Salesians were now taking over from the Maryknoll Fathers and so entering officially into the diocese of Hong Kong. The year was 1927. From the Casa

Gomes the theologate was shifted to Shaukiwan when two small houses with the adjoining land were purchased there. Here it remained till Fr. Suppo and his nine companions finished their courses and were ordained priests by Mgr. Valtorta in the Cathedral of Hong Kong on 30th May 1931.

The peregrinations of the theologate made for little loss with Fr. Suppo: "from their fruits you shall know.." His sermons were delightful for content and exposition; his practical day-to-day way of life was beautiful in its Christian priestliness; he was genuine and sincere, big in head and heart, a hater of bluff and sham.

He served his first year of priesthood as a teacher in the studentate at Shaukiwan. The following year he was day in day out with his Festive Oratory in Macau, discharging too the sacred duty of Confessor. God only knows the immense good he accomplished throughout his life in the confessional where his kindness and his intelligent comprehension spelled out a holy dedication. Among poor youths too he sought with sincerity to help alleviate their miserable conditions and raise their social status.

The years 1933-36 he spent as Prefect to the eminent Fr. Ernest Fontana, founder of our Salesian work in Shanghai and its environs. Together they skimped and scraped, borrowed and begged, and managed to complete two-thirds of a well planned school block with surrounding land, enough to afford ample extension when opportunity should offer. This was Don Bosco School of high repute, and of vast hopes.

The next two years Fr. Suppo was back to the mission field of Shiu Chow where he worked as Prefect to the Don Bosco Shcool.

In 1938 he returned to the studentate for a period of four years. He had settled in well at Shaukiwan as Prefect of Studies when World War II broke out. The studentate got deported by the British authorities as undesirable aliens. That meant for him the same work in a different centre—Nantau, Shanghai. Here he carried on till 1941 when he was sent down to Macau with the senior course of Theology students.

In 1942 he was entrusted with the taking over of Yuet Wah College. This had been a locally high-brow co-educational Chinese Middle School

under the auspices of U.S.A. Protestants (Baptists). There was much that was captious and bitter—inevitably so in the circumstances. Yet, within the short span of four years his fine tact and genuine interest succeeded in changing the school into a boys' realm of even enhanced repute for academical achievements and prowess in inter-school sports.

In 1946 he was back in Don Bosco School, Shanghai. This time as Rector. (Fr. Ernest Fontana, refined gentleman, well-read scholar, peerless Salesian priest, had died in Timor during the dark period of the Pacific War). Under Fr. Suppo the school took on new life. He shunted it on to the lines once planned for it. The challenging programme he drew up for the boys and their work-shops called for the best they had in them. They rose to it in a body. An esprit de corps developed that gave promise of big successes. So too in the parish. So too with the Salesian Sisters adjoining our compound.

Outside in the city, however, as in general throughout all China the writing was plainly on the wall. Fr. Suppo read it out to his confreres and to all depending on him. He sought with might and main to prevent the ruination as far as was humanly possible. It is comforting to recall his strength of purpose, his refusal to be daunted, his wise foresight for the safety of the confreres and the holding of Salesian property, his declared will to stand resolutely by God's Holy Will, whatever that might be.

Communism took over, Lenin's points of approach being followed out punctiliously. Our Houses, schools, and compounds were taken. Our confreres were asked to leave. On ridiculous trumped up charges peddled up and down the country in penny horrors Fr. Suppo and his confrere, Marius Cuomo, were taken away to prison. From 15th September 1951 till 4th January 1953 Fr. Suppo endured the galling humiliations of communist maltreatment. Only those who knew his sensitiveness to intellectual truth and to moral virtue can gauge the agonies he suffered in those sixteen months of harrowing experiences. His full-man devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was surely his strong support.

In 1953 he was sent to Taipei in charge of the Hua Ming Press. A big job was to be seen to: building up where ruin there was. His conscientious work was the master-guide for Fr. Rassiga and Fr. Avalle to map out for Fr. Pomati the huge damages Fr. Pomati should generously undertake for the Congregation's honour to make good.

Around this time Fr. Suppo was sent for a well deserved rest to his native Italy. This he did not seem to have got. On his return, he was made Provincial Economer for three years, and then Director of Tang King Po School for the following six.

This was his last opportunity to use his gifted mind on organizational work for the Congregation. The big complex, as is that school, profited by his wise guidance, and was streamlined by him for its mission.

As the last and crowning work of his life, he was looking forward to expending himself on a new big technical school in Kwai Chung, Hong Kong. This was denied him. True to the programme of life, he devoted himself to what was left for him to do as teacher and confessor—with one bright interval: for one year (1969-70) he managed a Training Course in Printing for Caritas in Aberdeen, Hong Kong.

His work as teacher and confessor he discharged with zeal and high success till his failing sight forced him away from the classroom in 1971. His sacred duty as confessor he discharged right to the end of his life, to the immense comfort of those frequenting his confessional.

This grand priest of God's celebrated his 70th birthday a little more than weeks before his death. His appearance was that of a much older man. His sufferings, both physical and moral, took heavy toll of his health. He developed chronic diabetes which inter alia was threatening total blindness.

The Good God called him to his reward within days of his devoted fellow-missionary, Fr. Joseph Geder, whose funeral he had attended.

May their souls be glorified in God!

Yours in Don Bosco,
A. SMITH.