



**OBITUARY LETTER  
OF  
FATHER FRANCIS WANG**

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### CONFESSOR OF THE FAITH

In the month of March 1994 , and within the brief space of two weeks, God called to Himself no fewer than three of our confreres, and all three of them were priests.

At 7 a.m. on Monday, March 14th. Fr. John Timmermans passed away peacefully in St. Paul's Hospital, Hong Kong. This good Belgian missionary was halfway into his 78th. year of age when for him the bell tolled. And it was only five days later, while the wound inflicted on us by the loss of Fr. Timmermans was still fresh, when God called again, at 4:00 a.m. on the feast of St. Joseph, Patron for a Happy Death, this time beckoning Fr. Francis Wang (Wong) to close his fruitful 83 years and 5 months on earth and hasten into the presence of God, our Father. Eight days later, at 2:30 in the morning of March 27th.(which was Palm Sunday) Fr. Peter Pomati concluded his long life of faithful service amongst us, at the ripe old age of 87 and 4 months. His remains now rest in the local cemetery, between the other two confreres with whom he had lived in community for the last few years of their lives.

The heroic life and example of Fr. Francis Wang calls for the preparation of his biography; I limit myself now to just a few pertinent remarks regarding his long life. This beloved brother of ours had three consuming desires: to reach the age of 70; to become a Bishop; and to die a martyr. One might well want to pass judgement on the

propriety of such desires, but it does appear that the good Lord, in His own mysterious ways, acquiesced and generously concurred with the aspirations of his faithful servant. I shall now proceed to illustrate this statement in the pages that follow.

## 1. SEVENTY PLUS FOURTEEN

Francis was born in Shanghai on October 5th.1910; he was christened three days later and given the name Francis Borgia. At that time, 1924, the Salesians had only recently arrived in Shanghai to take up the management of St. Joseph's School that had been built by the great Catholic philanthropist Joseph Lo Pahung. Francis entered this school in the year 1926. His ability and pleasant temperament did not go unnoticed and the Rector, Fr. Garelli, soon saw in him the makings of a good Salesian aspirant. Since we Salesians were still feeling our way, so to speak, in that great metropolis, he was entrusted to the care of the Jesuits in their college of St. Ignatius at Zikawei (Shanghai). In September 1930 he was sent to Italy to do his novitiate and on 30th. September 1931 made his first profession into the hands of Fr. Philip Rinaldi, at Villa Moglia near Chieri. The Blessed Philip Rinaldi, knowing him to be the first Chinese cleric, exhorted him to become "Pater multarum gentium". These words rang in his ears and were close to his heart for all the rest of his life. Among his companions during his years of philosophy (1931-34) were Don Luigi Fiora, Don Fortunato Faggion and Don Pietro Ciccarelli. From Valdocco Don Fiora writes:"We remember the goodness of Don Francesco, his friendly ways, his ability and readiness to adapt to new surroundings and customs - and this he did with the simplicity and enthusiasm of a fervent novice or neophyte. For us, all of us Italians,he was like the banner of our missionary conquests."

He began his period of practical training at Torino-Rebaudengo (1933-34) and continued at San Tarcisio in Rome (1934-35); and he completed it at the newly opened Aberdeen Technical School in Hong Kong (1935-36). After completing his theological studies in Macau (1937-39) and in Hong Kong (1939-40) he was ordained in the Cathedral in Hong Kong on August 15th. 1940. He was assigned to the Aberdeen Technical School as Catechist, an assignment he fulfilled with outstanding results until the year 1946. During the war years, which lasted three years and eight months - under Japanese occupation - he had some unenviable experiences. One fact in particular, during this period, illustrates his virtue and courage.

On December 8th. 1941, the Japanese Army began its attack on Hong Kong and on Christmas Day the Colony surrendered. The British Navy had requisitioned the Aberdeen Technical School for the duration of the war and the Japanese moved in immediately to take their place, sharing the school with the staff and students. These latter had returned to the school shortly after the cessation of hostilities, under the leadership of Fr. Francis Wang, and staked their claim as former residents. The students numbered 109 and the staff was significantly reduced, since the Rector and three of the confreres were interned in the Camp at Stanley. The burden of carrying on the direction of the community rested largely on the shoulders of Fr. Wang.

One day the boys were playing on the vast flat roof of the building and somehow or other came across a lot of canned goods in the main water tank. This was a godsend in those days of near famine! The students set about retrieving the tinned food from the tank but, most unfortunately and quite innocently, fouled or bemired the water just when one of the officers was having a shower! The flow of crystal-clear water that he was enjoying suddenly changed into

a most unusual and surprisingly murky, evil-smelling liquid that roused his ire. He immediately dispatched his attendant to find out the cause of the sudden change in the water, and he returned to inform him that some boys were playing in the tank on the roof. None of the youngsters was ready to own up to the "misdeed" and so the Officer ordered the boys to form a single file and then declared that they were to be counted from one to ten and that the tenth would be shot for the wrongdoing. The boys were exactly ten; it was wartime and not a time for niceties. The one responsible for the group, a past-pupil, rushed away below at once to inform Fr.Wang of the impending tragedy. Fr.Wang immediately dashed up on the roof and threw himself on his knees before the Officer, begging clemency for the boys who, like most boys,had simply been thoughtless. He said that if there had been any negligence it should be attributed to him, and offered himself to be punished. The Officer accepted the solution proposed but then, touched by Fr. Wang's selfless courage, contented himself with lashing out and giving the boys and Fr. Wang a few resounding clouts. The incident closed with the boys carrying many a bucket of clean water so that a shower that had begun in joy could be terminated with dignity and a certain amount of self-satisfaction. Don Wang always insisted that anyone else in his place would have acted in the same way. (One of the confreres, on hearing this, said that he personally would probably have been content with giving the "offenders" general absolution before execution!). And what if that Japanese officer had accepted the altruistic offer of Don Francesco? Perhaps we might have had our own Fr. Kolbe. But God had other plans in store for Fr. Wang.

He contracted tuberculosis and Fr. Charles Braga, his Provincial, sent him to our school in Kunming, a city that stands at a pleasant altitude and enjoys a mild climate throughout the year. One of the many things Fr. Wang did as catechist in the school there was

that he founded a Group for Young Catholics and formed a goodly number of young leaders. This brought great benefit to the Church but was also to become, years later, the reason for weighty accusations levelled against him by the communists.

## 2. CHRIST'S WITNESS

In the year 1949 there was a change of government in China. In that same year the movement of "Self Support and Reform in the Church" began to make itself heard and the tempest of the "Three Autonomies or Three-self Principles" gathered force: Self-support, Self-administration and Self-propagation. Such a movement could lend itself to quite orthodox interpretations. But not in our case, however. In fact, the foreign missionaries were expelled, one after the other, among them being the Rector Fr. Andrew Majcen (now a nonagenarian living in Ljubljana), the prefect Fr. L. Rubini (among the concelebrants at the funeral Eucharist) and Fr. John Timmermans (who died five days before Fr. Wang) not to mention several others.

Fr. Wang was the first priest in the diocese to be taken into custody: that was on August 18th. 1951 and he became No. 1383 in the prison on Chienju Street in Kunming. He took care not to let himself be won over, neither by blandishments nor threats nor blows. Since he had studied abroad and was able to speak several foreign languages (Latin, Italian, English and French) he was accused of being an anti-revolutionary and was sentenced to fifteen years in prison, after which were to be added thirteen years of re-education through hard labour; so, he really was a prisoner for twenty-eight years altogether. For some of this time his legs and hands were bound in such a manner that the metal lacerated his flesh. He was obliged to carry stones weighing 30, 40, 50 and 60 kilograms - weights

far superior to his weak constitution. Some of his fellow-prisoners, in order to gain merit in the eyes of the warders - lent a hand to tie the heavy burdens on his back, and in this way he had to cope with moving heavy blocks of stone, until one day he spat up blood. He was then given lighter work such as preparing gravel and the like. He was also employed in planting bananas and pineapples. The heavy work, the hunger and the torments he suffered left their mark on his frail body and left him a hunchback with a deformed backbone. Some years ago the undersigned, with his permission, had photos taken of his wounds and deformed spine, ad rei memoriam.

Both in the prison and while in the hard-labour camp he had no books, not even the Rosary; but he would always pray in silence, keeping count of the Hail Marys on his fingers. When asked what he was counting he would reply, "I'm keeping count of the days of imprisonment!" What follows now, I have taken from his memoirs. "The Psalmist says 'Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum'. This charity is sincere, it unites hearts and is even superior to that found among blood-brothers; it does not deceive nor does it make a fuss; it strives to be of help to others....and this is typical of the common life of us Salesians. From the moment of my imprisonment I had lost this fraternal charity and at first I became sad without it, even to the point of tears, while thinking night and day of my fellow-priests, of our Brothers, of my Rector and my Superior-General, all the while not knowing if we were ever to meet again. When would we be ever able again - in which year, which month and on which day to exchange letters and indulge in amiable conversations? They were all in my thoughts and I felt sure that I also had a place in theirs.

Later on, when things began to change and there was talk of reform and more openness, some confreres came from Hong Kong to

try and make contact with the Salesians who had had to remain on the Mainland. I was the first to be tracked down, the first to be re-found, the first to be contacted. In the first half of the year 1978 I received my first letter from a confrere. In the month of August of the following year another Salesian was able to visit me. From then on I experienced once more the intimate bond existing between us, between their world and mine.

The national policy of the Four Modernisations paved the way for the knowledge of foreign languages of prisoner No.1383 to be put to good use towards the re-construction of the fatherland. And so at long last I was able to leave the 'rehabilitation' centre and return to Kunming. I was assigned as translator to the Provincial Institute for Historical and Cultural Research, drawing a monthly salary of 120 RMB. My superiors in Hong Kong helped me to purchase a small house and so I now feel I am sufficiently well-provided for.

### 3. I AM THE SHEPHERD.

My physical needs have been attended to but mentally I am not at ease, I am worried.

When I was ordained the Bishop said to me, in the name of God: 'Tu es sacerdos in aeternum'. I am a Pastor but where is my flock? The churches have all been closed or turned into other uses, or even destroyed. Most of the clergy has been jailed or sent off to labour camps; the flock has been abandoned and left leaderless; religious life is in danger of disappearing; I must do something about this.

'But you have had twenty-eight years in prison; isn't that enough for you' someone said to me? But here it is not just a

question of courage; it is my duty. I am a priest and therefore a pastor; I must take care of my flock. In spite of the risks I must act; moreover, I have had twenty-eight years experience and so I must do something. One day, in the year 1980, the Bureau of Religious Affairs of the Province called together the few members still surviving of the local Church and gave us the good news: 'Soon Religion will surface again and enjoy freedom; churches will be re-opened and their property restored.' Can all this be true? Or is it just a question of idle words? I began conversing with some Christians who declared they would be ready to follow and support me if I were placed in charge. I set about reflecting very seriously about the matter. I said to myself: 'For more than twenty years the flock has not been allowed to go to pasture nor to slake its thirst at the living spring; now that there seems to be the hope of a revival why not take a risk? How can I be a pastor and yet hold myself back? After making a thorough analysis of the situation, I made up my mind and decided, at Easter 1981, to come forth and take care of the little flock, acquiescing with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks to the politics of reform and openness (glasnost?), religious freedom is conceded; and without too many queries about its genuineness we must make the most of the opportunity. Under the specious title "love the fatherland" participation in religious activities is encouraged (for all Catholics love their country); and in the name of religious freedom one may remain attached in spirit to the Supreme Pontiff. And so I decided to take part in the inaugural Mass at Christmas 1981. In the meeting I made a pronouncement: 'We love our Country but we will not abandon the Holy Father.' Some said: 'This is a personal opinion of yours and you can hold to it, but you have no right to voice it publicly.' And in my heart I said to myself: 'Well, if I can't say so in public I certainly intend to do so in private.' So, I was not listed among those who constituted the

Patriotic Association but only as an ordinary member. Evidently, the Government had no use for me. All the better for me, I thought, for in this way I shall be able to guide freely the faithful to be authentic catholics, that is catholics who support the Vicar of Christ.

Some went so far as to propose I be re-arrested or that my movements be curtailed; that I not be allowed to tend the flock but rather be kept under supervision.

With the passing of the years my health continued to deteriorate and on December 9th.1989 Divine Providence ordained that I reach Hong Kong; once again I am in the embrace of my mother the Congregation, to live in the great Salesian Brotherhood. This is Jesus and Mary's great gift to me - to let me enjoy in peace the evening of my life." What has been written above has been taken from Fr.Wang's memoirs.

On his leaving Kunming Fr. Wang had every reason to be happy for, there were already nine aspirants in the minor seminary, and just a few days previous to his departure a deacon was ordained to the priesthood. The local church could now look forward with hope to the future.

Everything considered, what Fr. Wang had achieved in the Church in Kunming is well worthy of a brave and prudent Pastor.

And here are other words we read in his memoirs:"Many are worrying about me; both in Hong Kong and from abroad some christians write to me saying:'In 1997 Hong Kong will return to Chinese sovereignty and the attitude to religion could deteriorate overnight. If a hostile policy towards religion is renewed, then we are in for more suffering!' I fully understand these words of apprehension

and solicitude, but being a man of God I have offered all up to Him and I fear nothing. Let us together beseech the good God and be docile to his plans!"

I imagine that Don Bosco, Blessed Philip Rinaldi, the Blessed Louis Versiglia and Callisto Caravario concur and exclaim in unison: "Bravo, Don Francesco! Truly, you are a good Salesian and a good priest!" And the Lord Himself will say: "Euge, serve bone et fidelis, intra in gaudium Domini tui!"

Although the parting of friends and brothers inevitably causes sorrow, today is not the time to give way to sadness but rather an occasion for rejoicing since our brother, a model pastor, will intercede for us before the Lord. Rest, rest, dear Francis -and pray, pray for the Church in China!

And well can he make his own the words of the Apostle Paul: "I have fought the good fight to the end; I have run the race to the finish, I have kept the faith." (2Tm.4:7)

## THE CONCLUSION

During these last years, since his arrival in Hong Kong, Fr. Wang received many visits and signs of attention from Confreres, Sisters, doctors and nurses, and from so many other brothers and sisters in the Lord. In the name of our Congregation and of his own relatives I would like to express to all of them our deep gratitude. I wish also to thank all those who from so many places sent us condolences, in particular His Eminence the Cardinal John Baptist Wu, the Clergy and Religious Superiors, the relatives of the deceased and the faithful of Kunming who sent a beautiful floral tribute. In a

certain sense the Fax that arrived from our Superior-General sums up very well what was also so well-expressed in the other messages. The Rector Major writes:

" I hasten to share in your grief for the passing away of our well-deserving confrere Fr. Francis Wang. Rest assured that I shall be present in spirit at the wake on the evening of March 22nd., and at the Mass of the Resurrection on the following morning.

Let us raise our prayers to God, but also our thanks for His having given to the Church and to our Salesian Family our dear Fr.Francis, whom I knew personally.

He leaves behind him the deep impression of being an authentic son of Don Bosco, who knew how to pass his life in the service of the Gospel, suffering twenty-eight long years of imprisonment faithful to Christ and His Vicar on earth, true to the spirit and example of St. John Bosco.

And now we have him interceding for us in the House of Our Father. "

At the conclusion of the Eucharistic Concelebration the representative of the Holy See in Hong Kong, Msgr. Fernando Filoni wished to add a word:

" Dear Francesco, I wish to offer you sincere thanks, in the name of the Holy Father and the Holy See, and in my own name for the good example you have given us. As the saying goes: 'Tempests put out small fires, but they intensify those that are big, and increase the dazzle of their flames.' "

These words can quite appropriately be applied to our dear Don Francesco, confessor of the faith in this our twentieth century.

Affectionately in Don Bosco,

Fr. John Baptist Zen, SDB.

Provincial.

22.3.1994

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## DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY:

FR. FRANCIS WANG - born in Shanghai (China) on October 5th. 1910, died in Hong Kong on March 19th. 1994 at the age of 83, after 62 years of profession and 53 of priesthood.



