

CHINA PROVINCE OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS, HONG KONG.



FR. MARK CAVALLIN

Don Bosco Technical School,
Kwai Chung, Hong Kong
19-5-1983

Dear Confreres,

With the death of Fr. Mark Cavallin our Province has lost a confrere with a truly "oratorian heart", one who loved the young and worked indefatigably for them up to the last moment of his life. In his funeral eulogy Fr. Provincial described Fr. Mark as the true figure of the Salesian referred to by Don Bosco in his spiritual testament when he said "If it happens that a Salesian should succumb through over-work and lose his life working for souls, our Congregation will have registered a great triumph, and copious blessings will be showered on it". Fr. Mark died suddenly of a heart attack on 28th December 1982. For several years he had been suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure and for several months before his death his eyesight had begun to fail. But in spite of these ailments he had resolutely refused to relent in his daily round of work.

On the evening of 28th December he and the Rector, who were the only two confreres in the house at that time, sat chatting after supper and when Fr. Mark withdrew to his room he appeared to be in the best of spirits. But at about 10:15 p.m. he knocked loudly at the Rector's door, he was panting and coughing and obviously in great distress. The Rector immediately called an ambulance, which arrived within fifteen minutes, and Fr. Mark who was slipping into unconsciousness was rushed to the hospital. Four doctors battled to save his life, but he did not respond to treatment and at 11:30 p.m. his strong and generous heart ceased beating.

Fr. Mark was born at Solagna in the Province of Vicenza, Italy, on 4th February 1914 the third of five children, and the only son, of Mark Cavallin and Catherine Nervo. The family though poor in material goods was rich in faith and gave two children to the Church — Fr. Mark who became a Salesian priest and missionary, and his elder sister, Norberta, who became a member of the African Missionary Society of Verona founded by Mons. Daniel Comboni..

Speaking of her brother's early years Sr. Norberta says that from childhood he was accustomed to hard work and sacrifice. Their father, like so many others in those parts was a charcoal-burner and every year, with the coming of spring left his native village together with his whole family for the region bordering on Yugoslavia. There, deep in the forest, cut off from the conveniences and commodities which others take for granted, they would work hard until the onset of winter in the production of charcoal. Not only was the work heavy and poorly paid but for over six months each year it deprived Mark of his schooling. When Mark was twelve years of age even this desultory schooling came to a halt. In order to help out with the family finances he had to leave school altogether and take up a job in a local factory. There he worked hard, and was happy each week to make his small but important contribution to the family income.

God, however, had better plans for young Mark. Two of his cousins were priests, one a member of the diocesan clergy and the other, Fr. Orlando Cavallin, a Salesian. According to Sr. Norberta, their example had always been a dominating influence in Mark's life and at the age of 15, encouraged by Fr. Orlando, he entered the Salesian Missionary College of Cardinal Cagliero at Ivrea to study for the priesthood. Initially, due to the frequent interruptions in his education up to that point he found the course of studies very difficult. But gradually, under the patient guidance of caring superiors, his keen intelligence and the phenomenal memory with which he was gifted asserted themselves, and he began to excel in his studies. He spent four years at Ivrea and, as Sr. Norberta points out, during the whole of that time he was unable to go home or even to receive visits from his parents. From spring to autumn the family had to carry on its work of charcoal burning, and could not afford long and costly train journeys. But young Mark passed those years happily and in 1933 on the completion of his studies he was accepted for admission to the novitiate and was also chosen as a member of the missionary group destined for the China Province. The record of his admission to the novitiate reads "An excellent young man, keen and enthusiastic, studious and hard-working. He has done extremely well in his studies and enjoys robust health."

On 7th December 1933 Mark, now nineteen years of age, arrived in Hong Kong where he began his year of novitiate at the Salesian House of Studies in Shauiwan. Fr. Louis Massimino, who was his Master of Novices, recalls that as a novice he was hardworking, generous, pious and cheerful and also of a childlike simplicity and naiveté. Fr. Mark never entirely lost this childlike simplicity and it gave him a characteristic buoyancy and enthusiasm which never failed him, even when weighed down with heavy, back-breaking work.

On 11th Jan. 1935, just one month before his twenty-first birthday, he made his first profession. The Salesian House of Studies, which housed the Novitiate, housed also the Studentate of Philosophy, and there for the next three years Bro. Mark dedicated himself to the study of philosophy. Gifted with a tenacious memory he found no difficulty in his studies. Fr. Massimino, his master of novices, who doubled also as professor of Philosophy, remembers how his keenness would lead him into discussions and arguments which at times became heated. But when the argument was over he would immediately regain his usual cheerful composure. And if in the heat of the argument he had been offended he would just smile, and would never bear anyone the slightest grudge. On completing his philosophical studies he was sent to St. Louis Industrial School, West Point, Hong Kong for his three years of practical training. From the records of those times we see that as a teacher and assistant he was still somewhat naive, but at the same time was deeply attached to his boys, worked hard for them and was always ready to sacrifice his time and convenience in order to help them. At the end of his practical training in 1940 the record of his admission to perpetual profession describes him as "hardworking, self-sacrificing and humble."

On returning to Hong Kong in 1972 Fr. Mark was sent to this school, the newly opened Don Bosco Technical School at Kwai Chung in the New Territories. The confreres were few and their work-load was consequently heavy. The Rector was Fr. Rudolph Haselsteiner who recalls how pleased he was to have Fr. Mark with him in those early days. Fr. Mark was no longer a young man, he was now getting on for sixty, but he was always cheerful and hard-working. He held the post of House Vicar, but gladly undertook, in addition, the work of Bursar and of Catechist. Moreover, fired by a true missionary spirit, he also took up the teaching of Catechism to the junior students. And, as if that were not enough, he also set about organizing a Youth Centre for the young people of the surrounding resettlement estates. He acquired a grant of land from the Government, he collected funds and had soon opened a thriving Youth Centre and Festive Oratory.

Fr. Haselsteiner mentions Fr. Mark's remarkable charism for the work of the Festive Oratory. "In this he was moved by a true love for the young. Through his many connections he received donations of money for his work, and also donations of biscuits and sweets which he distributed to the youngsters. But, his first aim was always the spreading of the word of God. And so each Sunday after their games he would assemble the youngsters under the covered playground and speak to them of Christ and his teachings. For him a Sunday without the preaching of the word of God was not a Sunday at all!"

Besides his work in the School and in the Youth Centre and Festive Oratory Fr. Mark also served for seven years as chaplain to the neighbouring community of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In this work he was reliable, punctual and generous. Sr. Teresa Cheng, the Superior, remarks that he was a holy priest who loved his priestly vocation, and who, even when his health began to deteriorate, would never refuse any request.

Indeed, Fr. Mark's heavy schedule of work gradually began to take its toll on his health. He developed high blood pressure and began to suffer from diabetes. Reluctantly, he was obliged to relinquish the post of Catechist and of Bursar, and to give up teaching. He suffered a heart attack and it became evident that his strong constitution was now severely undermined. But he, who had been a worker all his life, could not accept the fact that he was growing old and that his strength was waning. He continued undiminished his work in the Youth Centre and Festive Oratory and as chaplain to the Sisters. He now had more time at his disposal and so he willingly accepted invitations to preach and to administer the sacrament of reconciliation to communities of nuns. Although urged not to overtax himself, besides his daily Mass for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, he also insisted on saying each Saturday the anticipated Sunday Mass for the nursing staff of nearby Princess Margaret Hospital, and on Sundays he would say the evening Mass at the Parish Church of SS. Cosmas and Damian.

Finally, Fr. Mark's eyesight began to fail. By using a powerful magnifying glass he was able to continue celebrating Mass and reciting the liturgical hours. But now he had to admit to himself that his energies were fading. Psychologically, this admission was for him a bitter blow. From conversations with him it was clear that he who had always worked so hard and had never shirked difficulties was not at all troubled at the prospect of death, but was deeply worried at the thought of becoming inactive and useless to the Congregation. When reminded that, as long as he loved God and accepted His holy will, he would still be of immense value to the Congregation even though he could no longer work at all, he would smile. But one could see from his smile that in his estimation a rest from work was something that should only be enjoyed in Paradise! And God, in His goodness, crowned his wishes by allowing him to continue working up till the moment He called him to his reward.

Fr. Mark's funeral Mass was celebrated by Fr. Joseph Zen the Provincial, and about forty priests concelebrated. Many confreres were in attendance together with various communities of nuns to whom he had ministered, past pupils, young folk from the Youth Centre and Oratory which he had founded and run so ably, and a group of sorrowing students from Don Bosco Technical School to whom he had been a kind and understanding confessor.

ments. They were the children of the refugees who had poured into Hong Kong in the early fifties after the Communist takeover of the China mainland. They lived in flimsy huts on the hillsides or in leaking, unseaworthy boats moored in the adjacent Aldrich Bay. Regular schooling was out of the question for them, because primary education was neither free nor compulsory. Moreover, many of them had to work long hours at home each day on piece-work, such as the assembling of plastic goods, in order to augment the meagre family income.

The confreres of the Salesian School had already opened a free Evening School to provide a little education for these children. Fr. Mark, on his part, took up the work of the Festive Oratory and worked generously and self-sacrificingly to bring them a little spiritual and material help. Fr. Ercole Tiberi who was his Rector in those years writes of him: "I knew Fr. Cavallin when he was in his prime — strong, energetic and in excellent health, and I retain many happy memories of him. He was always a tireless worker and did not spare himself either for the pupils of the Salesian School or for the teeming crowds of children who flocked every Sunday to his Oratory. Sunday was for him a call to arms; the playground was his theatre of action, and there he was to be found, dripping with perspiration, from morning till night!"

In his work for those poor children Fr. Mark had an enthusiastic band of young helpers composed of Salesian novices, aspirants and of senior students of the Salesian School. All were happy to volunteer their time to organize games for the children and to teach them catechism. Joseph Man Yiu Lung, who was one of the most enthusiastic of those young helpers, is now a Parish priest in the Diocese of Hong Kong. He tells how, as the children came to know the Oratory, the weekly attendance quickly increased until it reached the staggering count of 2000!

Fr. Ercole Tiberi also recalls that whenever he could spare time from his heavy duties in the School Fr. Mark would go out collecting funds for his Oratory. Fund-raising, as anyone who has ever tried it will testify, can be a very disappointing and humiliating task. But in the words of Fr. Tiberi "Fr. Cavallin was always cheerful and optimistic. He had a strong pair of shoulders, not only to bear his heavy load of work but also to bear the disappointments and humiliations that came his way, without ever taking offence. On the whole, in the offices at which he called he was well received and given generous help for his poor boys. But if, at any time, he was received badly and sent away empty-handed he would never leave without a quiet word of thanks, and as he left would not fail to make a polite bow, as courtesy required."

Fr. Mark, besides the funds he collected, received also supplies of food generously donated by the Catholic Relief Services to help his Oratorians and their families. Fr. Joseph Man Yiu Lung mentions that after the organized games each week there would first be catechism lessons. Not only the School classrooms, where the children were able to sit in comfort in the school benches, but also the corridors and even the playground, where the children were obliged to sit on the ground, would be filled with groups of children. They listened attentively as Fr. Mark's young helpers told them the ageless story of Jesus who like them had also been a refugee and like them had also known what it meant to live a life of poverty. Then would come the distribution of bread rolls, an event eagerly awaited by the children, many of whom knew what it meant to go hungry. This was followed by a lucky draw in which clothing, stationery and other useful articles were distributed to the winners. Then the last and most valued prize, the centre of all admiration, was invariably a plump chicken which the lucky winner would take home happily to augment the family dinner. For fourteen years Fr. Mark worked in the Salesian School, doing an immense amount of good. Then in 1970 worn out by his incessant work he was given the opportunity to take a two-year course in Theology at the Lateran University in Rome. He embarked on the course with his usual enthusiasm, and obtained Diplomas in both Dogmatic and Pastoral Theology. Later he was often heard to express his gratitude at having been given this welcome opportunity to up-date himself in theology.

After his practical training he would, in the ordinary course of events, have gone to the Orphanage of the Immaculate Conception in Macau — the Mother House of the Province — to take up his theological studies. But on June 10th 1940 Italy entered the war, and far-reaching changes affected the Province. The Hong Kong Government, which admired the educational work done by the Salesians in the St. Louis Industrial School and the Aberdeen Industrial School, was loth to intern the Italian Salesians as prisoners of war. Permission was therefore given for them to leave Hong Kong for Shanghai. The Superiors decided that not only the Italian confreres but also the confreres in formation, together with all others not needed for the running of the St. Louis Industrial School and Aberdeen Industrial School should likewise transfer to Shanghai. The move was made towards the end of June 1940. On arrival in Shanghai the confreres in formation took up their residence in the bombed-out school of St. Joseph in Nantao, the Chinese area of the city. It was here that for the next four years Bro. Mark attended to his theological studies.

Fr. Louis Massimino who had been his master of novices and had later taught him as a student of philosophy was now on the teaching staff of the Studentate of Theology. He recalls that Bro. Mark passed the years of his theological studies happily, without encountering any major problems. He was still hard-working and cheerful and always ready to help others in any way he could. He did not possess extraordinary endowments, but was unfailingly serene and cheerful. And Fr. Massimino goes on to say that it was there in Shanghai, amidst the poverty and privation of the war years that the good Lord prepared him for what was later to be his labour of love — the Festive oratory. No special studies, no academic titles were required for such a work — just a generous and cheerful heart and a heroic spirit of hard work and sacrifice!

Bro. Mark was ordained to the priesthood in the Hospice of St. Joseph by Monsignor Augustin Haouiseé S.J., Bishop of Shanghai, on the feast of St. Francis de Sales, 29th. January 1944, just one week before his thirtieth birthday. Fr. Salvatore Buggea, a companion of Fr. Mark, recalls that in those years of hunger and privation there was little in the way of material celebration on the occasion of their ordination. The twelve newly ordained priests were not even able to have a group photograph as a memento of that happy day. But their spirits were high. All were eager — and none more so than Fr. Mark — to start their work of priestly apostolate. After ordination Fr. Mark's first assignment was as teacher and assistant in the Don Bosco Industrial School situated in Yangtszepoo, the factory district of Shanghai. He worked with zeal and with a spirit of sacrifice and in the following year he was made Catechist.

On August 15th 1945 the Pacific War finally came to an end. Fr. Carlo Braga, the Provincial, now had to think urgently of sending confreres to Hong Kong to relieve the small staff of Salesians that had kept the St. Louis and the Aberdeen Industrial Schools operating during the long and difficult years of the war. Fr. Mark was one of the confreres chosen, and in early 1946 he left Shanghai to take up the post of teacher and assistant in St. Louis Industrial School in Hong Kong. He had worked there as a cleric and he was overjoyed to return to the scene of his early labours, and his enthusiasm and cheerfulness brought the confreres much needed encouragement. Two years later help was needed in another quarter, and the cheerful and hardworking Fr. Mark was sent to help in the Colégio Don Bosco, a School in Macao for Portuguese students run by Salesians of the Portuguese Province. This transfer meant a change of language since the medium of instruction in the school was Portuguese. But with his usual cheerfulness and generosity he accepted. For eight years he worked there and filled in succession the posts of Catechist, Prefect of Studies and Vice Rector.

In 1956 he was transferred to the Salesian School in Shaukiwan, Hong Kong, which was, at that time, expanding rapidly. It ran both Chinese and English sections and catered for boarding and day students. Fr. Mark was sent there as Catechist and immediately found scope for his zeal among the numerous students of both primary and secondary level. But he noticed that there were also vast numbers of almost destitute children living nearby in squatter settle-

I conclude this letter with the words of Fr. Rudolph Haselsteiner — "To be honest, I must say that at times Fr. Cavallin's unceasing activity upset some people. But looking at his life as a whole, any imperfections which might have been noted in him were mere trifles! What stands out for all to see is his hard work, his spirit of sacrifice, his unfailing cheerfulness, and his constant readiness to undertake pastoral work for souls."

And that surely is what Don Bosco hopes to see in all Salesians!

**Yours in Don Bosco,
Fr. Denis Martin, SDB
(Rector)**



Fr. Mark with the children of the Festive Oratory



With young men of the Don Bosco Youth Centre

For the Necrology:

Fr. Mark Cavallin:

Born	: 4-2-1914	(Solagna, Italy)
Professed	: 11-1-1935	(Hong Kong)
Ordained	: 29-1-1944	(Shanghai)
Died	: 28-12-1982	(Hong Kong)