



OBITUARY LETTER
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FATHER MARIO COAREZZA

HONG KONG 1992

FATHER MARIO COAREZZA

Father MARIO COAREZZA passed away at Canossa Hospital on the morning of January 14th. 1992, just two months short of his 75th. birthday. He had been rushed to hospital on Jan. 3rd. after suffering a severe heart attack; and soon after admission he had a second attack that led the doctor to warn us that a third attack could prove fatal: and that is precisely what happened on the morning of Jan. 14th.

Mario Coarezza's parents, Richard Coarezza and Appolonia Meschini, had their first two children in Argentina, to which country Richard had emigrated from Italy. They later returned to Italy and on March 25, 1917 Mario was born to them at Gallarate in the archdiocese of Milan. On April 22nd. of the same year he was christened in the local church of the Assumption. His parents were good-living people and Mario was forever grateful to them for the unfailing good example they offered to their three children. As soon as he completed his six years of compulsory elementary education, he found employment in a dye-works where he worked for six years prior to his departure for the Salesian aspirantate.

While still a young apprentice at Gallarate, he studiously avoided involvement in the political ferment of those years and whole-heartedly threw himself into projects and activities promoted by the local branch of Catholic Action. It was during these years that members of some sect or other showed up in the square of the town and began peddling their proselytizing literature. They had no sooner appeared than Mario busied himself calling together a few companions, with whom he went to the strangers, informing them politely but firmly that since in Gallarate was none of their adherents to cater for they had better beat a retreat and move on to pastures new.

He was already a zealous Catholic and the call to the Missions soon found an echo in his generous soul. He first approached the P.I.M.E. for admission to their seminary, but being already seventeen they advised him to contact the Salesians who were operating a Sons of Mary programme. He then applied to the Parma Fathers and received a similar reply. Eventually, he came to know of the Salesians through a gentleman who had been instrumental in sending many young men to them to try out their vocation. Mario applied to Ivrea and was readily accepted. His employers at the dye-works were sad to see him go and assured him that if he ever changed his mind and returned to Gallarate he could be sure of finding employment with them again.

It was September 9th.1935, when he first entered a Salesian House, the Salesian Missionary Aspirantate at Ivrea. Here he immediately felt himself at home among the 200 young students, budding missionaries like himself, many of them in their late teens or early twenties. Apart from a doorkeeper, a cobbler and the Salesian Sisters, all the other needs of the House were well taken care of by its robust, enthusiastic and youthful population: the vegetable garden, the farm, the grounds, the house chores etc. So, while Mario was able to dedicate much of his time to study and classes he was also kept in good trim with plenty of varied manual work. The students at Ivrea were anything but pampered. If Mario needed it, life in the aspirantate taught him to be diligent, industrious and generous; to use his time well and cultivate a love for study and work and community-living; above all, he learned to pray, to love the Blessed Virgin Mary and to burn with a keen desire to become a missionary.

During his second year at Ivrea he began spending the holiday time at Montalenghe. The Provincial secretary would call to pick him up and accompany him to Montalenghe, where the members of the General Council would spend some time, in turns, to take some relaxation and rest. It was here that he came to know and to admire Fr. Peter Ricaldone, whose conversations on catechetical topics impressed him so much

that years later that is the name he gave to his own (Peter Ricaldone) Catechetical Centre in Hong Kong.

On Whit Sunday, in the month of June 1939, there was, at Ivrea, the traditional solemn announcement of the names of the students of the senior class chosen to go on the Missions. The ceremony was held in the accustomed spot where stood the statue of Our Lady. We are told that Mario leapt for joy when he heard his name read out - and the assignment was for CHINA!

It was on July 9th, that he received the religious habit from the Salesian Bishop of Viedma (Argentine) Msgr. Nicholas Esandi. After a brief visit home he was to join the group of novices from Bagnolo, Gaeta, Ivrea and Penango leaving for China; but with the outbreak of war at the beginning of September 1939, it became increasingly difficult to obtain tickets to travel. So the group was sent to Castelnuovo Don Bosco to begin their novitiate until such times as accommodation could be found for them on some ship travelling to the Orient. Fortunately, space was found for some of them in the hold of the SS Conte Verde; all the cabins had been reserved for Jews fleeing in all directions from Hitler's Europe. Eventually, on October 17th., the five novices were able to leave from Venice and, after an uneventful trip, reached Hong Kong on November 12th. It was here that they resumed their novitiate after a necessary interruption lasting 28 days. One fellow-novice recalls that Mario bravely took up the study of Cantonese and English but even at that early date he gave no signs of being a linguist. As a matter of fact, right up until his dying day he never felt at ease in the use of these two languages.

When Italy entered the war on June 11, 1940 the foreign community at the House of Studies in Shaukiwan (including the novitiate) was placed under police supervision. The novices (8 foreigners and one Chinese, who died later as a young priest in a communist prison) made their profession on October 18th., and three days later, were among 30 Salesians

who left by ship for Shanghai. In this huge metropolis the refugee-students of philosophy and theology, and the new novices, took up residence in a big, rambling building attached to a Salesian school that had been entrusted to us in 1924.

During these years the studentate organized an exhibition commemorating the centenary of the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries in the Kiang Nan Mission, situated in the diocese of Shanghai. Mario revealed his abilities in the preparation of pictorial material for the exposition and from then onward he spent most of his spare time collecting, classifying and using all he could get his hands on that could be usefully converted into catechetical material for publications that were already taking shape in his mind. With the assistance of his classmates, who were of great help to him especially for the language, he began publishing books and booklets.

On completion of his philosophical studies in 1943, he was assigned to a newly-opened House in Suchow (Kiangsu Province). In this city poverty was extreme, and the confreres, from the Rector down, shared the spartan conditions of the boarders: one fair-sized room had to serve as a dormitory, a study hall, dining-room; the same tables being used as beds, desks, and dining-tables. The narrow streets of the town were deeply covered with dust in the dry weather and were ankle-deep in mud in the rainy season. The House was small; conditions were cramped; food was poor, and so also was his knowledge of the language. And yet, in spite of all these handicaps, he would always assert with great pride that the time he spent at Suchow was the happiest period of his life.

He returned to Shanghai in 1946, to pursue his studies for the priesthood. As during his years of philosophy, he found time to busy himself with the local Oratory or Youth Club, and with his catechetical pictures. Shanghai fell to the Communists on May 24th. 1949. The holy Bishop Haouisee

had died the preceding year and in June 1950 his successor, presently Cardinal Kung, was enthroned. Mario was ordained, together with his six companions, on May 24th. 1950 by the Maryknoll Bishop Msgr. James Walsh. (Incidentally, there have been no more Salesian ordinations in China since that day.) Mario was asked to stay on at the adjacent Salesian School for the year 1950-51.

In mid-September he left Shanghai for Macau and in this Portuguese enclave he was entrusted with the promotion of the Salesian Press, being also in the same House, first Catechist and then prefect of the big apprentices-student community in the Mother House of the China Province. He was already 34 years of age and was on the threshold of a ministry that was to absorb him until his death 41 years later. He spent four years doing this work in Macau, before being transferred to Hong Kong where the task fell to him of re-organizing and consolidating the work he knew and loved best - the catechetical apostolate

From his earliest years as a Salesian he gave proof of his great love, almost an obsession, for the diffusion of christian doctrine. No doubt, his contact with Catholic Action and his years at Ivrea deepened and sharpened his keenness to present the good news to all and sundry and lead them to Christ. He was fully aware of his limitations and he did try hard to keep abreast with developments and advances in the catechetical field. He was already 52 when he obtained permission from his superior to get an update on catechetics at the Lateran University in Rome, in 1968. He used to the utmost advantage one gift that God had given him - the ability to prepare a pictorial catechism that was verily a boon to catechists, greatly facilitating the transmission of Christ's message of love and hope.

Fr. Provincial ably summed up Mario's activities in the catechetical field when in the funeral oration, he told us: "Mario Coarezza had an inclination and special predilection for the catechism. Already as a young Salesian he busied

himself preparing and accumulating valuable material that was to eventually appear in the dress of original and interesting catechisms that were translated into several languages. Assigned by the superiors in 1952 to the Salesian Catechetical Centre, he dedicated himself entirely to the work. Although he had but a meagre working knowledge of Chinese and English yet, with the cooperation of some confreres and others, he was able to publish, in the space of forty years, a considerable quantity of Catechetical material. Conservative estimates place his output at, at least, 100.000 copies of catechisms for the kindergarten, well over one million copies for elementary school pupils, and more than 130.000 copies for middle schools. A complete series of his Living Catechisms, ingenious, original, pictorial representations that delighted a wide audience, were also presented to three successive Pontiffs. He also propagated the recitation of the Rosary and published much material honouring Our Blessed Lady."

Fr. Provincial went on to quote Fr. Mario himself, who had written: "I love Jesus and His Holy Mother, who have given me all I possess; and I would want the last words I utter in the life to be for them words of gratitude and love. I hope that in spite of my many failings I shall see them soon. I beg pardon of anyone I may have upset. Please pray for me".

Looking back on his life and his achievements and bearing in mind his personal qualities one might be rightly inclined to say that his success as a dedicated religious was quite remarkable. All told, one might say that he did "a jolly good job". He was zealous; he was pious. His zeal drove him to work hard for the good of souls and this entailed facing bravely quite a few seemingly unsurmountable difficulties in his life.

He was regular in his life as a religious and prudent in all his undertakings and contacts. He was endowed with a great spirit of dedication to his work and accomplished it

with enthusiasm and joy. He was always ready to perform even the most menial of tasks in order to economize and so further the apostolate that he deeply sensed he had been called by God to promote. Daily Mass and meditation gave impetus to his work throughout the day. He lived a good priestly life.

A classmate of his who remained close to him throughout his Salesian life declares that Mario was fully aware of his mediocrity but, trusting in God who delights in doing great things with us in spite of our weaknesses - provided we trust fully in Him - he threw himself with zest into catechetical work.

He spent all his time in his repository and in the packing-house. He would plan his programmes, wisely and gratefully enlist the help of others, supervise the execution of the work and then busy himself with the diffusion of his publications. He was totally absorbed in his work, limiting his presence in the community to the practices of piety and meals in common. There was something of the workaholic about him. Certainly no one could ever accuse him of wasting time. He was conservative in his outlook and tenacious in his strictures. It must be said, however, that he was never selfish, jealous, spiteful or unfair. He was a man of conviction, of principle; and his only desire in everything was to be faithful to his vocation, to the Congregation and to the work God had called him to do.

Referring back to the words of Fr. Provincial that were quoted above one could say in all honesty that Don Mario "loved Jesus and Mary" immensely and throughout his entire life strived to show to them his undying gratitude for all that they had given him to be and to do. He was fully aware that, like so many of us, he had his limitations and his failings but, trusting in them, he looked forward to seeing them soon and being with them forever. He left written the request that we pray for him; and although we all feel that Jesus and Mary and Don Bosco will have received him with a resounding "Bravo, Mario!" in view of his life-long fidelity,

yet let us listen to Mario's plea that we pray for him and so hasten that "seeing them SOON" which was his only preoccupation at the end of a life consecrated to the service of God, to the glory of Mary and to the catechetical mission of Don Bosco.

We tender our heartfelt condolences to his family and thank them for helping him to become a spiritual son of St. John Bosco. We were so happy that two of his close relatives were able to be with us for the funeral services and accompany his mortal remains to the family burial plot in his native place. Please join us in our prayers to obtain good vocations that will help us to continue the catechetical work so dear to the heart of Don Bosco and to his faithful disciple Mario.

Salesian Community,
Tang King Po School, Kowloon.

For the necrology:

Father Mario Coarezza, born at Gallarate (Italy) on 25.3.1917, died in Hong Kong on 14.1.1992 at the age of 74, 51 years of profession and 41 of priesthood.