

Marius Rassiga

Blood on the River Bank



Hong Kong

1980

BLOOD ON THE RIVER BANK

A biographical sketch of
the Salesian Protomartyrs

Bishop L. Versiglia

and

Father C. Caravario

by

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(translation by Fr. Julian Carpella, S. D. B.)

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FOREWORD

On 25th February, 1980 there occurs the fiftieth anniversary of the martyrdom of Mons. L. Versiglia and Fr. C. Caravario, Salesian Missionaries in China who met a glorious death at the hands of a band of pirates while trying to protect some young Christian ladies who were travelling with them.

Rev. F. M. Rassiga, himself a Salesian missionary in China for the past half century, has written the present biography of the two heroes, which has been translated into English by his Confrere Fr. J. Carpella.

I am glad to introduce this book which I am sure will make the two Salesian proto-martyrs better known and increase devotion in them.

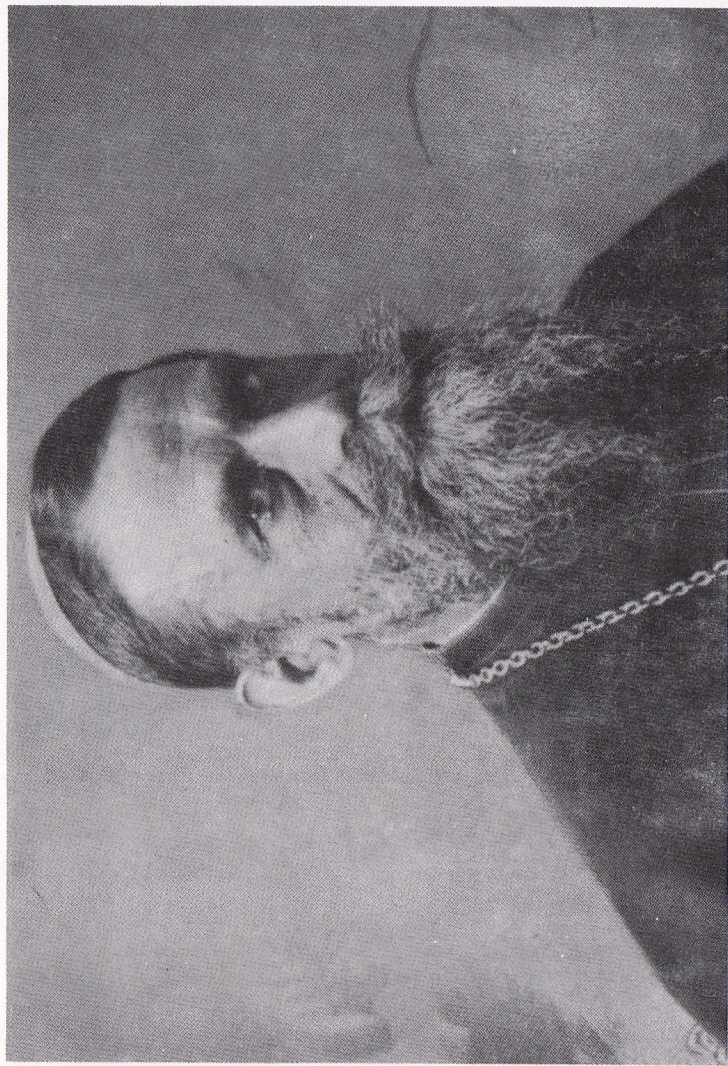
Rev. Joseph Zen, S. D. B.
Provincial Superior

Hong Kong, 1st January, 1980

Omaggio

F. M. Rassiga

H.K. A.T.S.



Mons. L. Versiglia

MONS. L. VERSIGLIA (1873–1930)

The Early Years

Aloysius Versiglia was born on 5th June, 1873 at Oliva Gessi in the Diocese of Tortona, Province of Pavia in Northern Italy. His family was a very good one, the ideal nest for young Luigi and his two sisters to grow up in. A pious lad, he used to attend church often and to serve holy mass with great pleasure. Endowed with a lively nature, he was quite successful in his studies, particularly in arithmetic. Noticing his pious attitude, people used to say that he would become a priest but he had no such intention on his mind. When a learned priest who was teaching mathematics in Pavia one day suggested that Luigi should follow him to town and promised he would help him through his studies as far as university, Luigi turned down the proposal; he feared his friend might induce him to become a priest.

Ten years old Luigi loved horses and occasionally enjoyed riding the one that belonged to a colonel who was living near by. In 1885 he agreed to join St. John Bosco's Oratory in Turin. Reason: he was told that there he would be able to study and eventually enrol in the well-known Veterinary School of the city. It was September 1885 when the young boy arrived at the Oratory: there he spent the following three years. To adapt to the new place proved pretty hard and soon Luigi wrote back to his father asking him to come over and take him back home. Father, however, was pleasantly surprised when, arriving at Valcocco, he was told by a smiling Luigi that he already liked the place and preferred to stay there. The atmosphere of Don Bosco's Oratory had conquered him.

At the conclusion of his first year in Turin Luigi did not have much to show in terms of good marks; his teachers thought that perhaps he had missed a solid foundation in his primary schooling.

Yet his determination to succeed and his hard work during the summer holidays and in successive school years brought him up to near the top of his class and kept him there throughout. At that time Don Bosco was nearing the end of his holy life; young Luigi was lucky enough to see the aging Saint several times and on the occasion of the last entertainment in his honour the lad was chosen to deliver an address of greetings and good wishes to him on behalf of his fellow-students.

Don Bosco was pleased and invited him to his room where he had something special to tell him.

A few days later, however, when Luigi went along with the intention of visiting him, he was told that the Saint was ill and was unable to receive him.

Thus he missed the longed-for encounter which perhaps might have thrown some light on his future.

It was during his last year at the Oratory that Luigi started feeling attracted to the way of life led by the Salesians. His budding vocation was tended by a zealous priest Fr. Trione who saw in the boy the stuff that priests are made of.

When some time later the teenager witnessed the moving ceremony of farewell to departing missionaries in the Shrine of Our Lady Help of Christians, he was attracted by one of them who appeared particularly modest and devout: it was then that his future shone bright and clear in his mind: he would be a Salesian and a missionary.

Novitiate and Religious Profession

In 1886 Luigi spent his summer holidays in Lanzo and thence went straight to Foglizzo to start his year of novitiate. On 21st October Fr. M. Rua, the successor of Don Bosco, held his first clothing ceremony of Salesian clerics and Luigi Versiglia was one of them.

His time as a novice was spent in earnest: prayer and study taken seriously made him a model cleric. In this he was also encouraged by a good friend of his Fr. Arthur Conelli. The latter had often heard Don Bosco speak about China and so Luigi through him became acquainted with and gradually grew fond of his future country of adoption.

In early October 1889 the novices of Foglizzo moved to Valsalice at the outskirts of Turin where the Salesians had their seminary and where Don Bosco's tomb was situated. It was there that they made their retreat at the conclusion of which they took their vows.

A Student in Rome

The School year 1889–1890 saw Brother Luigi at Valsalice where he prepared for and successfully passed his public exams thus completing his secondary education. It was then that his Superiors decided to send him to Rome to attend the Gregorian University. It was due recognition of his piety and brilliant intelligence.

In Rome Bro. Luigi lodged at Sacro Cuore and from there he walked every day with his two fellow students to the University busily discussing their youthful problems. Being physically stronger and mentally more mature, brother easily became their obvious leader.

Fond of lads as he was, brother Luigi enjoyed working in the local Boys' Club on Sundays: the boys esteemed and loved him because among other things, he was also an outstanding actor on the stage.

Study and work at the Club went on apace with his efforts to strive after perfection. Of this we possess a shining evidence in the letters he wrote to his Master Fr. Bianchi and Fr. Barberis, at Foglizzo.

He obtains his Ph. D.

In 15th June, 1893 Bro. Versiglia forwarded his thesis to the University authorities and on 3rd July successfully defended it thus gaining his Doctor of Philosophy Degree. The solemn Congregation to confer degrees was held on 24th October in the church of St. Ignatius, Rome. The new doctor was jubilant and with him his friends who had come to congratulate him.

That same day at 3:00 p.m. he was already on board the train bound for Foglizzo where his Superiors had sent him.

Three years well spent

At Foglizzo Bro. Versiglia was kept quite busy: he was Prefect of Studies, supervisor of the novices and teacher of Philosophy. In the esteem and love of the students he came right next to the Superior Fr. Bianchi.

The novices were 113 and, as was the custom in those days, they studied also some philosophy. To be prefect of studies, supervisor and teacher was indeed a heavy burden but brother shouldered it happily and successfully. He was quite exacting with his charges but his severity came to complement the fatherly goodness of the Master and so helped to form good religious out of those often green adolescents. His teaching was clear without appearing brilliant; this was very much appreciated by his pupils who had had to put up with the high-flying eloquence of a previous teacher.

In the field of piety, brother was indeed outstanding but rather by example than by words.

In those years he also studied his theology and on 21st December was ordained a priest by Mons. A. Richelmy, Bishop of Ivrea. He was 22 years old and the dispensation from canonical age had to be obtained for him. He was 18 months short of it.

Rector and Master of Novices

In those early days the Salesians had only one Novitiate House but eventually others were opened. The one for the Roman Province was set up in 1896 at Genzano and young Fr. Versiglia was sent there as Superior, Master of Novices as well as director of the attached boys' club. Material hardships particularly at the beginning, were not lacking, but they were overcome by Fr. Luigi and his novices with wisdom and joy. Deeply devout of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, he knew how to teach his charges to love and imitate the Lord.

Later the House accommodated not only the novices but also the students of Philosophy. It was then that his virtue was put to the test. Some of the teachers were not in full agreement with his views and methods and made no secret of it with the young brothers. Fr. Versiglia could have solved the problem easily by use of his authority, but he preferred to tackle it with patience, silence and prayer. That turned out to be a difficult year for father, who, however emerged victorious.

Meanwhile the Boys' Club was still his favourite and left sweet memories in the hearts of his boys as well as in his own. Fr. Eugene Ceria, the historian of the Congregation, who was sent to Genzano as Rector in 1922, heard people speak highly of Fr. Versiglia and his boys' club.

Don Bosco and China

St. John Bosco in his prophetic dreams saw the future Salesian missions in China and especially those in Peking and Hong Kong. In his spiritual will and testament he clearly stated that before long his children would be going to work in that great nation.

Fr. Conelli and Fr. Rondina, S. J.

Fr. Conelli, who was a teacher at Foglizzo, used also to write for the stage and to send his drafts to Fr. Francis Xavier Rondina, S. J. for revision. The latter was one of the writers of the well-known review "La Civiltà Cattolica" in Rome and was also keen on writing works for the stage. Fr. Conelli was aware that Fr. Rondina had spent some years in China, so he wrote him about Don Bosco's prophetic words

and added that the Salesians, he himself for one, were very keen on going to work there. It was the beginning of a providential correspondence that would help realize the Saint's prophetic words. Fr. Rondina had taught in the Seminary and College of Macau for several years and had quite a number of affectionate past-pupils there. Macau was still very much in his mind and heart in spite of the fact that he had been rudely driven out of it in 1871 through the scheming of evil people.

Fr. Rondina took up the idea with enthusiasm and did his best to make the Salesians known in Macau: he rightly thought that the Portuguese territory would eventually be the bridgehead for the Salesians to enter China as it had been for many before them.

Macau awaits the Salesians

Fr. Rondina's clever propaganda turned out successful: three successive bishops of Macau asked the Salesians to work in their diocese, but only the last one saw his desire fulfilled.

Mons. Madeiros was the first on the list: he had asked that some Salesians be sent to take care of the mission of Timor (which in those days was part of the Diocese of Macau) and at the same time had given them permission to establish a procuration in Macau to take care of the business of the new mission.

Fr. M. Rua had replied that he would send some Salesians to Timor after he had been allowed to establish an orphanage in Macau. Mons. Madeiros did not see eye to eye with Fr. Rua in this and the deal was not realized.

The second bishop was Mons. Carvalho who worked through the Nunciature at Lisbon to have the Salesians in Macau. He was keen on having an orphanage in his diocese and arrangements went on quite smoothly: a convention was signed and the Salesians were about to leave for the Far East in 1900; yet the proverbial spanner got into the works: the Portuguese Authorities refused to subsidize the passage of the missionaries (which they were bound to do in force of the Portuguese Patronage of the Missions). Again the plan misfired.

The third Bishop was more fortunate: Mons. Paolino de Azevedo e Castro (Mons. Paolino, as he was affectionately called) was Bishop of Macau from 1904 to 1918. He came across the correspondence between his predecessor and the Salesians and wrote them that he was all for the idea of the orphanage: he added that it should be named "Orphanage of the Immaculate Conception" to commemorate the Golden Jubilee Anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma.

Arrangements started in April 1904 and by the end of 1905 came to a happy conclusion. The Salesians were again ready to set sail. Mons Paolino was no more fortunate than Mons. Carvalho in his request for a Government subsidy to pay for the passage but he went ahead and paid for it out of his own purse and the missionaries at last saw light at the end of the tunnel.

Fr. Versiglia leads the Salesian pioneers to China

Many of his confreres expected Fr. Conelli to lead the first group of missionaries to China: some even thought that Don Bosco himself had been of that opinion, although this was never proved. Fr. Conelli, then Superior of the Roman Province, was not in good health at the time. The Superiors in Turin were told so by the Rector of the Sacro Cuore House in Rome. Fr. Conelli, aware of the situation, wrote them that he was ready to do whatever they would decide. They replied that he should stay behind and should suggest who could take his place as head of the expedition. Fr. Conelli set his eyes on Fr. Versiglia who of course was only too happy at the idea. It was then that Fr. Cerruti wrote him a letter dated 21st August 1905 in which in his usual humorous vein he notified him officially of the plan of the Superiors in Turin. Fr. Versiglia left Genzano at once and after spending some time in Portugal and in England to familiarize himself with the languages of the two countries, towards the end of the year he was back in Turin ready to leave for Macau.

The first Salesians set out for China

They were Fr. Versiglia, Fr. Olive, Fr. Fergnani and three lay brothers, Carmagnola, Rota and Borasio. They set sail from Genoa on 18th January, 1906. They were seen off by Fr. Paul Albera of the Superior council. At Naples they were greeted by Fr. Conelli who brought along a souvenir from the Holy Father Pius X in the form of a portrait autographed by the Pope himself.

The Salesians reach China

It was 19th February, 1906 when the missionaries arrived in Hong Kong and the following day in nearby Macau. They were warmly welcomed by the Bishop, the Reverend Canons, the Vicar General and the Jesuit Fathers. Then they were taken to the new orphanage by the Bishop himself who blessed the new little chapel. A few days were spent at the Seminary with the Jesuit Fathers, while their new lodgings were being readied for them at the orphanage.



The Orphanage of Macau in 1906: H. L. the Bishop, the Salesian
Superiors and the early pupils.

The little Orphanage

It was a small house near the seminary without any playground at all but still good enough to begin work. The pupils either orphan or poor boys, numbered about 30 but soon increased to the maximum allowed by the premises: 51 of them.

The newly arrived Salesians started tackling the basic problem: learning the Chinese language, which was far from easy. They were helped by a seminarian and by some teachers, while the Jesuit fathers readily agreed to hear the boys' confessions and to teach them catechism. Classes were started, workshops opened: fairly primitive at the beginning, they kept improving with the passing of time. A few months later the faithful of Macau were surprised to hear the little orphans, still almost illiterate, sing "The Mass of the Angels" in good Gregorian chant. The occasion was the feastday of Our Lady Help of Christians: which the Salesians had decided to celebrate solemnly for the first time on Chinese soil. The highlight of the day was the Holy Baptism which a 14 year old lad received. In October of the same year 19 boys received their first Holy Communion which the Bishop himself was glad to distribute.

However, it was not all plain sailing at the new orphanage. The language was pretty tough indeed but the main problem was the lack of accomodation. The Bishop of course was aware of it and writing a glowing report to Fr. M. Rua, promised that he would see to it that the budding institution would be given ample opportunity to develop.

What hurt the Salesians most, however, was their realization that the Portuguese Community, the Bishop and the Clergy excepted, was not enthusiastic about the new venture. Reason: the Salesians were taking care only of Chinese boys. Fr. Versiglia, remembering Don Bosco's prophetic words on the one hand and finding his work so limited and little appreciated on the other, had moments of discouragement to put up with. Providentially good Fr. Olive kept encouraging him and reminding him of the eventual development of Salesian work in China.

A big boost to morale was given by the brassband of the Orphanage which soon became well-known and appreciated not only in Macau but also beyond the border. A memorable success was recorded in the house chronicle when the young musicians travelled to Canton to enliven a charity celebration there. Eventually the Portuguese of the territory began to change their minds too when they noticed that the tailoring and shoe-making departments of the Orphanage could produce articles to their taste and fancy and saw that the work of the Salesians for the Chinese lads actually

was a blessing to the Portuguese community as well. In 1910 Fr. Cogliolo, Superior of the Portuguese Province, was in Macau for his canonical visitation. He was pleased with the work of his Confreres and forwarded a very favourable report to the Superior General Fr. M. Rua. He pointed out, however, both to the Bishop and to Fr. Rua that the work was seriously hampered by lack of adequate accomodation.

The Salesians at the "Sixteen Pillar House"

The peculiar building with the peculiar name (it was actually surrounded by 16 pillars) was well-known in Macau; in those days it belonged to the Bishop and housed an institution for girls. The latter vacated it and the Salesians were invited to occupy it, which they did quite happily. The building was old but strong, in an open field, thus providing a place to play and to build on in the future. Unfortunately the happiness of its new in-mates was to be short-lived.

The Portuguese Revolution

The upheaval that shook the country in 1910 abolished the monarchy, established a republic and harassed the Church. A decree dated 8th October suppressed religious orders in Portugal and in the colonies; in Macau it came into effect on 19th November.

It was hoped that the Salesian orphanage might be spared but the revolutionaries had their way; so the Salesians had to leave the territory and find shelter in Hong Kong. There they received ready hospitality from the Bishop and the Fathers of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME). The boys were sent back home if they had one or were entrusted to the Bishop.

The Mission of Heung Shan

Fr. Versiglia soon after setting foot on Hong Kong soil, informed his Superiors about the forced departure of the Salesians from Macau and asked them what was to be done. The superior general Fr. Albera replied that they should stay put in the Far East. Fr. Versiglia was quite happy at the decision, which he had hoped for, and set about to look for some work his confreres could do. He was offered an orphanage in Canton and a parish in Manila, but he had to reckon with Mons. Paolino who was determined to keep the Salesians in his diocese. The Bishop offered them the care of the district of Heung Shan (now called Chung Shan) which was adjacent to the enclave of Macau. Thence, he hoped, the sons of Don Bosco would eventually go back to Macau when circumstances allowed it. Negotiations were undertaken and successfully concluded with the approval of Headquarters in Turin. A convention



Orfanato da Imaculada Conceição (Entrada principal)

The Orphanage of Macau, 1912; the "Sixteen Pillar House".



Fr. Versiglia and the missionary pioneers in Heung Shan.

was signed and the Salesians were put in charge of the new place, which Fr. Versiglia and Fr. Olive entered on 8th May, 1911. The two fathers now faced a new challenge in a field previously taken care of by the clergy of the diocese of Macau. The work was hard, communications were difficult, the place was infested by pirates and troubled by frequent civil wars; besides, the people were very superstitious: because of these circumstances conversions had not been numerous and christians were few and isolated.

The first task of the new comers was to go round to visit or, as Fr. Olive put it, “to see and to be seen” in order to become familiar with the new environment and to be known by the people. In 1911 Fr. Vincent Bernardini and Fr. John Pedrazzini came to their help and were stationed on the island of Lappa just facing Macau, where a small Christian community existed: they were there mainly with the purpose of studying the language. While Fr. Bernardini, still upset by his forced departure from Macau, was making rather slow progress, Fr. Pedrazzini learnt quickly and well and became an active and successful missionary. In 1912 two more confreres joined the group: Fr. Ignatius Canazei, from Tyrol, who studied the Chinese language extremely hard and became a very good sinologue, and Fr. Joseph da Silva Lucas, Portuguese, who unluckily was not a very brilliant linguist; yet, he as well as Fr. Bernardini, were able to use the rich talents they possessed to the full when, not much later, they were allowed to return to work among the boys of the Orphanage in Macau. Besides attending to the work of evangelization, Fr. Versiglia and Fr. Olive exerted themselves unsparingly when in 1912 the plague broke out in their district. Heedless of the danger of contagion, they went round attending to people’s needs and in quite a number of cases they instructed and baptized those in danger of dying. They also visited two secluded islands where some lepers were living.

The year 1912 also marked the establishment of the Chinese Republic after the overthrow of the Monarchy. Fr. Versiglia was in Shek Ki, the district capital, when the revolutionary troops arrived. The people of the town were quite frightened and sought the protection of the missionary. Fortunately nothing unpleasant happened because the imperial troops surrendered at once and the soldiers of the new regime limited themselves to cutting off all pigtails that were worn by the people as a symbol of submission to the alien Manchu dynasty that had just fallen. In the same year the Salesians, to their great joy, were able to go back to Macau and re-open the orphanage.

The Salesians go back to Macau

Mons. Paolino who was quite keen on seeing the Salesians back in Macau, spared no

efforts to obtain the Government's permission for them to return. Eventually the prayers of many and the patience of the Bishop won the day and the sons of Don Bosco on 12 September, 1912 were back at the orphanage, delighted to see most of the former pupils back too.

Fr. Versiglia and his helpers now took care both of the orphanage and of the district of Heung Shan. Poor abandoned boys in need of instruction and christian education were sent from the mission to the orphanage and left the latter several years later, well educated and exemplary teenagers, to go back to their villages.

In 1914 Fr. Versiglia, who was being helped by six priests and five coadiutor brothers, divided the mission into three districts, each one of them in the charge of a missionary, while he himself kept the overall supervision of the orphanage and of the mission.

Other outstanding activities of Fr. Versiglia

Fr. Versiglia was a humble man but in spite of his efforts to keep a very low personal profile, he could not help becoming wellknown for his outstanding virtues. This brought him additional duties as a spiritual director. The local clergy, the Canossian Sisters and many lay people found in him a reliable guide in the pursuit of Christian perfection. Among them was Fr. Joseph da Costa Nunes who later became Bishop of Macau, Patriarch of Goa and Cardinal. It was he who once wrote, "The Chapel of the Orphanage used to be a centre of Christian piety that contributed considerably to improving the religious atmosphere in Macau." Side by side with the spiritual, Fr. Versiglia forged bravely ahead with the material. He established the pious union of Salesian co-operators and with the assistance of one of them the generous gentleman Simplicio Gomes, started and brought to completion a new three-story building which housed big dormitories, workshops and porticos. Thus he was able to receive more pupils.

From where did Fr. Versiglia obtain such zeal and such prodigious activity? They were all born of his deep spirit of prayer, holiness of life and the support of his many admiring friends.

Fr. Versiglia's first journey to Italy

In 1916 Fr. Versiglia decided to return to Italy to visit his Superiors in Turin. His intention was to discuss with them his plan for a mission in China that would be entirely in the care of the Salesians. At the moment they were in charge of the orphanage in Macau and of the district of Heung Shan. The latter was part of the

diocese of Macau and had been entrusted to them on an emergency basis; it might easily revert to the local clergy at any moment, as it actually did in 1927. Fr. Versiglia hoped for a better and more reliable deal and so on 16th May, 1916 he set sail and reached Turin on 17th June. There he was able to speak with Card. Cagliero. The latter, who had useful contacts in Rome, showed great willingness to help because he clearly remembered the words Don Bosco had addressed to him three days before his death, "I recommend to you the missions of Asia". Fr. Versiglia worked hard with the Holy See and with his Superiors. He managed to obtain from Government the exemption from military service for some confreres who had been assigned to the China mission; he was also able to get financial help for his works and meanwhile found time to preach two spiritual retreats: to the Aspirants in Valsalice and to the novices at Foglizzo.

Father Versiglia on his way back to China

Father left Turin on 25th January, 1917 and travelled to Barcellona in Spain, where he was planning to embark. It was here that a number of snags came in the way and tested Fr. Versiglia's patience and his trust in Our Lady Help of Christians. With her assistance he was able to find a ship that was about to set sail for the Philippines (all other vessels had suspended their departures) and at the last moment managed to load his baggage including a statue of the Blessed Mother: it was all touch and go indeed, and good Fr. Versiglia had plenty of reasons to thank Our Lady and to spread devotion to her.

A further snag blocked progress at St. Vincent in the Cape Verde Islands, where there took place a long stop-over of 28 days due to lack of bunker coal. Father had just to bear it and pray. The Good Lord and the Blessed Mother consoled him, however, because at last the ship sailed and eventually reached Capetown: here Father spent five happy days in the company of his confreres of that city.

The last problem of the journey cropped up in Singapore where Father Versiglia was unable to book an early passage to Hong Kong. Again, however, at the last moment, a vacancy suddenly occurred on board a fully booked ship and so he departed and eventually reached Macau on 24th May, the feastday of Our Lady Help of Christians, bringing along the statue of the Blessed Mother and a heart full of gratitude to her, who had been assisting him so visibly all along.

He received a rousing welcome from confreres, boys as well as from the religious and and civil authorities of the city.

The new Salesian Mission

The journey of Fr. Versiglia to Italy was indeed successful. On 21st July, 1917 the Sacred Congregation De Propaganda Fide wrote Mons. G. B. De Guebriant, M. E. P., Vicar Apostolic of Canton asking him to hand over part of his vast vicariate to the Salesians that they might establish a mission. The Vicar was glad to accept the proposal and on 14th October while travelling with Fr. Versiglia to Sancian Island on a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Francis Xavier, he told him of his intention. Thus on 21st December Fr. Versiglia and Fr. Olive went to Canton to visit the Vicar and drew up an agreement by which they accepted the northernmost portion of Kwangtung Province as their new mission and bound themselves to provide it with the necessary Salesian personnel within two years.

The Holy See and the Salesian Superiors gladly gave their consent to the deal. The Salesians of Macau and Heung Shan received the news with great pleasure and asked Fr. Versiglia to appoint two confreres to start the new work at once. Father selected Fr. Olive who was working in Heung Shan District and Fr. Guarona who was prefect of studies in the Orphanage of Macau. The two fathers left Macau on 26th February, 1918 and travelled to Shiu Chow, the town that was to be the centre of the new mission. From there they set out for the mission stations assigned to them, Nam Yung for Fr. Olive and Chi Hing for Fr. Guarona. On their way to their destination they had a foretaste of adventure when they were attacked and robbed by a band of outlaws and then needed an escort of soldiers to see them safe to their stations.

Fr. Versiglia visits the new Mission

Fr. Versiglia had been unable to accompany the two missionaries but two months later he left Macau to go to pay them a visit. The civil war that was being fought in the area delayed his arrival at Shiu Chow and made the visit quite dangerous. Father went bravely ahead and risking his life more than once by crossing the lines of fire of the contending armies managed to see Fr. Guarona first and then with him went to visit Fr. Olive, thus reassuring the two confreres that they were being followed and assisted by their confreres in their first difficult missionary efforts.

The new Missionaries

Fr. Versiglia after his return to Macau, wrote his Superiors in Turin asking them to send him personnel as soon as possible. Father indeed found himself between two fires: Mons. De Guebriant was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Salesian missionaries for Shiu Chow while the Bishop of Macau was complaining that two fathers had been

removed from his diocese to work elsewhere. The Superiors in Turin sent six fathers and one laybrother who set out on the long journey to the Far East on 20th June, 1918. After a brief stop-over in Naples they set sail for Port Said: the crossing of the Mediterranean infested by enemy submarines was obviously quite risky and took them over two weeks to accomplish. Unfortunately while in Port Said they lost one of their companions, Fr. E. Cattaneo, who became seriously sick and eventually had to be repatriated. On 31st July they left Egypt on board a steamer bound for Shanghai. The journey turned out to be a very painful one: the vessel was travelling on ballast only, the weather was extremely hot and the cabin they occupied was situated next to the ship's funnel. Add sea-sickness during the crossing of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea and you may imagine in what condition the six confreres finally reached Shanghai on 13th September. After spending a few days with the Jesuit fathers in that city, they set sail for Hong Kong and thence for Macau which they finally reached on 23rd September. After a period of rest the newcomers accompanied by good Fr. Versiglia departed for Shiuchow which they reached on 17th October. Fr. Olive was then appointed the tutor of the new missionaries especially as regarded the learning of the Chinese Language and spent with them the first few months of adaptation to the new place. As soon as they felt smart enough to fend for themselves, they boldly left for their mission stations eager to work hard in the vineyard of the Lord.

In this way the Salesians started the new China mission and gradually kept increasing in members while the fathers of the M. E. P. went on withdrawing their own personnel from the District.

Fr. Versiglia visits the mission

Father Versiglia took a keen interest in the new mission and decided that in the first place he must come to know it very well. So, after seeing Fr. Olive and Fr. Guarona, he undertook a long and thorough visit. From the district of Nam Yung where he had met the two pioneers he proceeded to those of Yan Fa and Lok Chong and finally that of Lin Chow. He took almost two months in the summer of 1918 and was able to see for himself how hard the missionaries of the M. E. P. and the local priests had been working and at the same time how much remained to be done in the way of consolidating the faith of the christians and spreading the Gospel message to the pagans.

A second expedition

This second group of missionaries left Turin on 20th August 1919 and travelled to

Marseilles. They set sail on 23rd and reached Hong Kong on 28th September. Their journey was uneventful and their arrival a happy one for all concerned especially for Fr. Versiglia who was so badly in need of help.

A grave loss

The new missionaries were still on their way to China, when the mission suffered a serious loss.

Fr. Olive had made his retreat in August 1919 at Macau with great fervour and was about to return to his mission when he received a pressing invitation from his former faithful in Heung Shan to pay them a visit. He decided to satisfy their desire. His visit turned out a great blessing for those Christians.

On 11th September Father arrived in Canton. Although he felt quite tired, he spent the whole day buying articles for the confreres who were about to arrive from Europe. The following day too he busied himself to help his confreres. On the evening of 12th September he fell gravely ill. It was cholera, which most probably he had contracted in Heung Shan. He was immediately hospitalized and taken good care of. There followed a temporary improvement but on the 18th his heart failed and in the early afternoon the brave missionary passed away after duly receiving the sacrament of the sick.

The mission of Shiu Chow is consecrated to Our Lady Help of Christians

The new missionaries arrived in Shiu Chow on 21st October with Fr. Versiglia. On the 24th all the confreres of the mission gathered together before the altar of the modest chapel and consecrated themselves and the new mission to Our Lady Help of Christians. The statue of the Blessed Mother had been donated to Father Garelli by the Catholic University of Turin and had reached Shiu Chow the previous year. It stood there smiling encouragingly at the sons of Don Bosco. On the following Sunday, the 26th, the consecration was renewed by Fr. Guarona and the Christians of Shiu Chow, whom he had thoroughly prepared for the rite.

Fr. Versiglia visits the mission again

This third visit began in late January 1920. He was glad to notice that evangelization was progressing satisfactorily in all districts and that the new missionaries were studying the language with great enthusiasm, eager as they were to start their apostolate as soon as possible. Meanwhile arrangements were being made in Rome and Turin

to have the new mission declared a Vicariate Apostolic by the Holy See. Fr. Versiglia was glad at this but at the same time he was afraid that he might be made a bishop. He had already written his Superiors begging them ^{to} look for a better man and telling them that he was keen on staying put in the place and dependent on the new Vicar Apostolic.

The Mission of Shiu Chow becomes a Vicariate Apostolic

Although the new mission was taken care of by the Salesians, juridically it still depended on the Vicar Apostolic of Canton. As the new missionaries arrived in 1919, the conditions set in the contract having been fulfilled, steps were taken to make the new mission juridically independent. A decree dated 9th April, 1920 signed by H. H. Pope Benedict XV elevated the mission to the rank of Vicariate and in a consistory held on 22nd April Fr. Versiglia was appointed titular bishop of Caristo and Vicar Apostolic of Shiu Chow.

Asked where and when he intended to be ordained, father answered that if it all depended on himself, the reply would be, "Nowhere" but he added that if he were forced to accept the ordination, he preferred to receive it in Canton, possibly in October, when Mons. De Guebriant returned to his See. The Bishop at the time was visiting all the missions of China by order of the Holy See: the visit prepared for the arrival of the first Apostolic Delegate Mons. C. Constantini. The papal bulls were late in arriving and so the ordination of Fr. Versiglia was delayed until 9th January, 1921.

Another loss

One full year after the death of Fr. Olive had not yet elapsed, when another confrere went to his reward. Fr. Joseph Colombo, whom Fr. Versiglia defined "a model of virtue" and "valuable counsellor of outstanding culture", had been the head of the 1919 missionary expedition to China. He had been struggling hard to adapt to the new place and to learn the language but had found the heat of the place very hard to bear. His confreres advised him to move to a more comfortable station at Fong Tong in the mountains. Accompanied by a servant and by a Christian, he set out on July the 27th. He had hardly covered 15 kilometres, when he started showing signs of stress and then at around 10 a.m. collapsed never to rise again. An hour later Father Colombo went to his reward there by the side of the road. His servant had already rushed away to call for help and the Christian, frightened by the sight of a dead man, put his rosary beads between the fingers of the deceased, set an open umbrella above his head and . . . ran away.

Fr. Versiglia notified the Superior general Fr. Albera of the loss of Fr. Colombo and ardently begged him to send more missionaries. He did so again and again afterwards but unfortunately, as we shall see, almost always to no avail.

The Episcopal Ordination

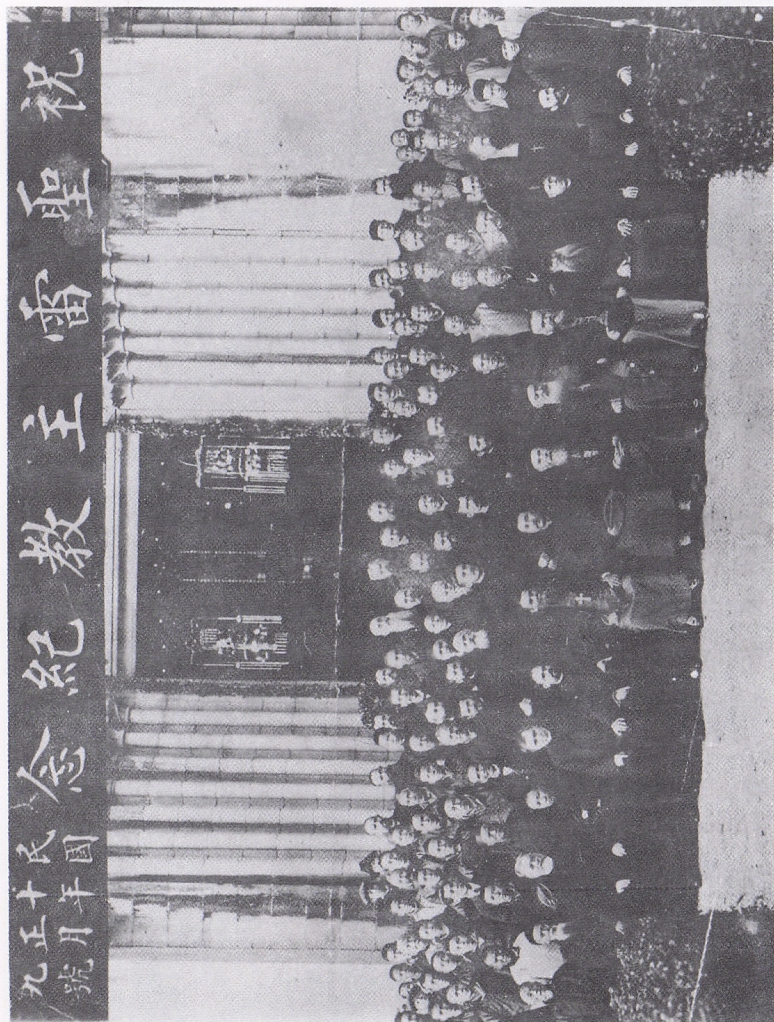
The ordination of Fr. Versiglia took place on 9th January 1921. It turned out very solemn and was attended by numerous clergy of various nationalities, by many Christians among whom a good number from Shiu Chow. The ordaining prelate was Mons. De Guebriant assisted by Mons. Pozzoni Vicar Apostolic of Hong Kong, and by Mons. A. Raysacc Vicar Apostolic of Swatow. Mons. Joseph da Costa Nunes, Bishop elect of Macau, was also in attendance.

The Salesians from the Mission, from Heung Shan and from Macau contributed the musical part to the ceremony and sang pieces by Salesian composers Fr. Cimatti and M. Pagella.

The solemn dinner of the occasion was honoured by the presence also of the civil Authorities among whom was the Governor of Canton. In his speech Mons. De Guebriant spoke of the "Sister Mission" to whom the new Bishop replied by stating that his new Vicariate was not a "Sister Mission" but a "daughter mission" ever so grateful to the "mother mission".

Mons. Versiglia then went to Macau where confreres, co-operators and boys intended to congratulate him and to celebrate his silver jubilee of priestly ordination. The co-operators presented him with a complete set of clothes for himself and sacred articles for his church in Shiu Chow. Monsignor was then wearing old episcopal clothes that had belonged to a deceased bishop and had been sent him from Turin. He was very much moved by the kindness of his co-operators.

He celebrated a pontifical high mass in the cathedral of Macau and then was entertained by the boys of the Orphanage with a programme of music and gymnastic displays: they wanted to show him how much he was still remembered and loved. The new bishop left Macau on 14th January accompanied by some of his confreres and by the brass band of the Orphanage conducted by Fr. Lucas. They reached Shiu Chow at seven p.m.. It was already dark and the Christians, who had been waiting for him a long time, improvised a colourful procession au-flambeaux with music and plenty of fire-crackers to welcome their new Bishop who was carried to his modest residence in a colourful sedan chair in real oriental style.



The episcopal ordination of Mons. L. Versiglia in Canton.



Mons. Versiglia with the early pupils of the Orphanage in Ho Sai.

The small chapel, dark and unadorned though it was, now had become his pro-cathedral and there Monsignor, after the singing of the Te Deum, imparted his first pontifical blessing.

The following day he celebrated his pontifical mass in the small chapel, where it was hardly possible to move about.

The same day the local authorities came to do him homage while the brass band entertained them with lively music. The evening was spent happily at Ho Sai where the new St. Joseph Orphanage was under construction. It was there that a historic photograph was taken of Mons. Versiglia surrounded by his boys: the Salesian Bishop amidst his poor youth.

Bishop L. Versiglia

Having reached this point of our story, I feel that to continue narrating events in chronological order would increase the length of this book considerably. So I have decided to proceed by topics, presenting the personality of Mons. Versiglia in its various aspects. This at first might give an incomplete idea of the man, but I am sure that the reader, after going through the whole book, will be able to behold the mosaic in its entirety and will realize that Mons. Versiglia was indeed a great and holy man.

Bishop Versiglia the Builder

When the Salesians first arrived in Shiu Chow, the mission possessed only one poor residence: a small house in the local style in a narrow street that skirted the ancient walls of the city. Since the Christians in Shiu Chow were few, the resident missionary who had to look after two more districts, used to live there only occasionally. The station was called Sin Tong Mun (i.e. The New Eastern Gate, because it was situated near the gate of the city): it was there that the Salesians consecrated the new mission to Our Lady Help of Christians and Mons. Versiglia celebrated his first pontifical holy mass.

The new Bishop did not think about building a new residence for himself (he never bothered about his own personal comfort) but at once set about planning something for the boys, as a Salesian worthy of the name would always do. West of the river (Ho Sai in Chinese) the mission owned a small house surrounded by a modest piece of land: the place lay a short distance from the ruins of a house which the famous Jesuit missionary Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J. had built in 1589. Fr. Versiglia, before

he was made a bishop, had built an extra storey on top of it in order to use it as the "St. Joseph Orphanage" and as a primary school. It was his first masterpiece: he was the architect, the engineer and the foreman at the same time because, as far as possible, he used to supervise the progress of the work.

Monsignor personally prepared the blue prints of all the buildings he put up as well of those he failed to put up. It was a standard joke of his that whoever possesses money builds and whoever has no money makes plans! The orphanage was officially opened on 17th April, 1921 and welcomed seven orphans sent by the missionaries and till then housed at Sin Tong Mun. The inauguration attracted more boys from the neighbourhood, who asked to enrol in the new school: thus a section for day boys was also opened. When girls appeared with the same request, they were told that the Sisters would not be long in coming to take care of them. The following year saw 80 boys on the roll and a lively brass band. Mons. Versiglia had purchased the instruments and Fr. C. Braga with enthusiasm and patience had trained the budding musicians.

Fr. Vincent Bernardini who had lost his parents in the devastating earthquake of Messina in December 1908 handed over most of the money he had inherited to the Bishop with the intention that a church be built in the Vicariate to perpetuate their memory. The beautiful church, dedicated to St. Joseph, was erected by the side of the orphanage and opened on 7th October, 1923.

The Orphanage was soon overcrowded but good teachers were hard to get; they had to cross the river every day by boat and were afraid of being attacked on the way in those unsettled times. Monsignor set about looking for a piece of land in Shiu Chow itself; luckily he found one (where in the old days the mandarin's dwelling used to be) and there he built the "Don Bosco Trade School".

At the same time he also moved the senior primary classes from Ho Sai to the new place. The work developed satisfactorily in the following years so that eventually the "Don Bosco School" housed also the middle as well as the teacher training sections. Beside the school, the Bishop built also a large chapel which catered for the needs of the school and was also his own pro-cathedral. Then he left his residence at Sin Tong Mun and moved over to the newly built school where he occupied one room on the first floor: conveniently partitioned, it provided him with an office and a bedroom; indeed a poor residence for a poor bishop. It was now high time to get the Salesian Sisters to look after the girls: so Bishop Versiglia built a nice house for them in Ho Sai and later on orphanage as well as a school for future lady catechists. Although the mission already owned a small school for girls in

Shiu Chow, Monsignor put up a beautiful building for the Sisters next to the Don Bosco School. The new place catered for girls at the primary and secondary levels and trained lady teachers as well. It ran on the same lines and was as successful as its counterpart for boys at the "Don Bosco" although on a somewhat more modest scale. In those days the local families did not care much about giving their daughters any schooling beyond the primary level.

The last building Mons. Versiglia erected was that of his minor seminary. For this purpose he extended and adapted the premises in Ho Sai. He inaugurated it with great joy on the eve of his departure for Lin Chow in February 1930 to start the fateful journey that would conclude his heroic life with the glorious crown of martyrdom.

With the bishop's encouragement and advice, his missionaries also put up several buildings throughout the mission.

Mons. Versiglia, however, keen as he was on providing churches, schools and residences all over the territory, never thought of building something for himself.

Fr. John Guarona, the bishop's pro-vicar, admired Monsignor's zeal but thought that it was his duty to build something decent for him to live and work in. During 1926 and 1927 the bishop spend a considerable time in the United States and Canada to attend the International Eucharistic Congress of Chicago and to collect funds for his mission. Fr. Guarona took advantage of his long absence and erected the bishop's house, which was worthy of a bishop. Besides this, the new building would also serve as a diocesan centre for the clergy who would be coming to the city on business or to attend their spiritual retreats.

On his return Mons. Versiglia, who had quite austere ideas about poverty, thought that the place was altogether too "luxurious" and decided that it should be known as "The Missionary's House" not "The Bishop's House". He moved into it in late September, 1927 and decided to have also his young seminarians under the same roof. They had been attending classes in the Don Bosco School with the other students but from now on they would have Mons. Versiglia himself as their Rector, Teacher and Supervisor.

Versiglia's journeys

As most missionaries do, Mons. Versiglia used to travel a great deal. I will describe some of his pastoral visits, since writing about all of them would take too long.

First, however, let me tell how people used to travel in those days. It was often on foot: obviously this would be very tiring. Roads, or rather narrow paths, zig-zagged across paddy fields; in sunny weather they would exhaust the traveller with intense heat and on rainy days they would become muddy and slippery; small mountains trails, badly surfaced with rough stones, would make you breathless when climbing up and break your legs when climbing down; many hours would be spent walking the fierce heat of the sun without the relief of shady trees.

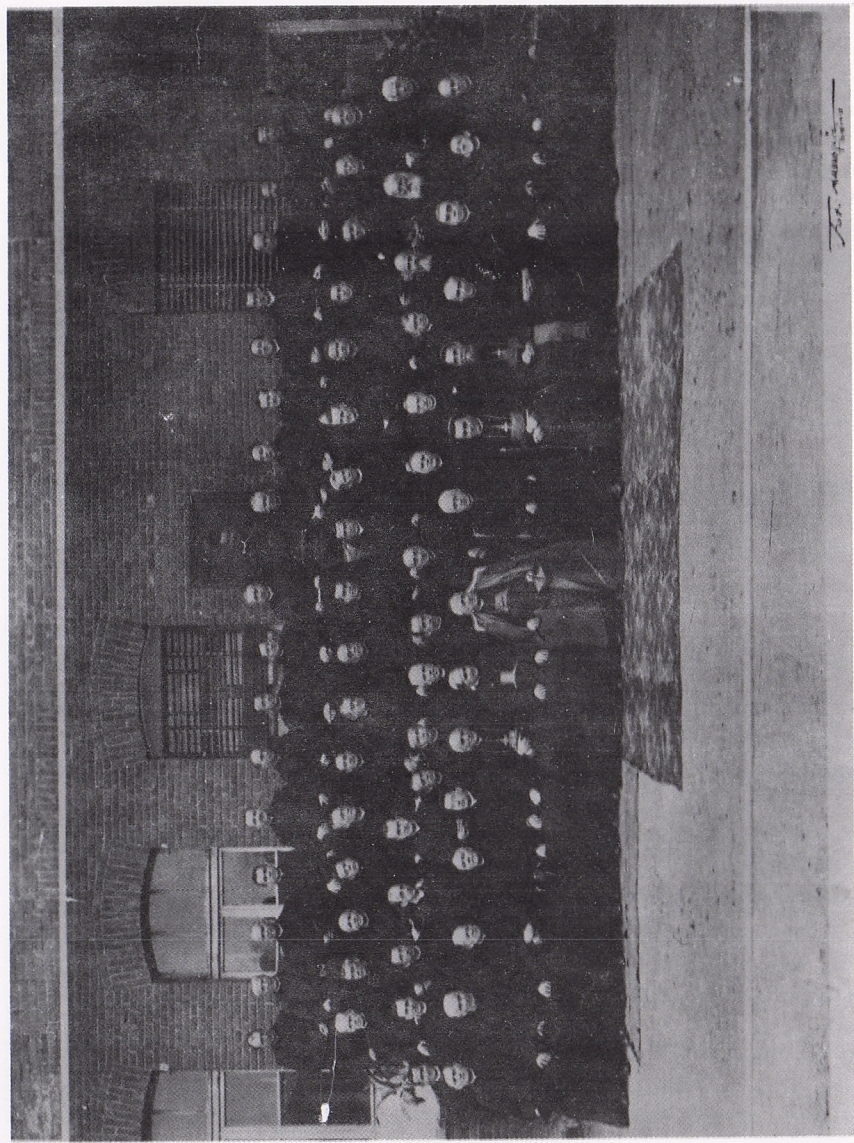
When distances were greater, recourse was had to the horse. Monsignor often rode a horse: yet long riding would prove tiresome and the danger of being unhorsed by a restive beast was ever present. The bishop was a good rider and it was due to his skill that on one occasion he escaped danger by jumping off the pony which suddenly had turned frisky. The road was occasionally not suitable for riding, so one had to dismount and proceed on foot dragging the horse along. Bridges were also a problem at times. What if the horse was unwilling to walk over a shaky bridge? No way, except to walk along the bank looking for a place to wade across.

The most comfortable way of travelling would be the sedan chair, but in view of the high cost the Bishop never made use of it.

Travelling by boat was also troublesome: spending hours sitting or rather, crouching and if on board a public craft, in the motley company of men, women, chickens, pigs etc.

Even if the boat was a hired one, the journey was far from comfortable. In the winter season sitting still for hours one would be chilled stiff and in summer one would feel as hot as in an oven. Sailing against the wind, the going would be very slow while sailing with the wind, one would be troubled by the smoke from the tiny kitchen situated at the stern of the craft.

In the early months of 1924 Mons. Versiglia visited the districts in the North East of the mission, travelling mostly on horseback when the roads and the weather allowed. At times he would arrive at his destination late at night and miss his supper. Once surprised by nightfall on the way, he was lucky enough to come across a house where some Christians lived; they were happy and honoured to play host to their bishop. On another similar occasion he was forced to seek shelter with a family of pagans, who were also quite hospitable and helpful. The situation was indeed far from ideal but at least the tired traveller would find shelter from the pouring rain. On his way back to Shiu Chow, Monsignor had to cross a deserted area: the soldiers had burned down the villages and the people had all fled. There was no



Mons. Versiglia in Turin on the occasion of the 1922 General Chapter.

way of getting a bowlful of rice or a cup of tea. Unluckier still were the men who were carrying his baggage; while lagging behind, they were waylaid by robbers who got away with all the belongings of the bishop including his pastoral staff and some objects intended for the missionary exhibition in Turin. The hapless fellows deprived of the little cash they possessed had to go begging for some in order to continue their journey: only the following day were they able to reach Shiu Chow, tired, hungry and thoroughly frightened.

In February and March of the same year, Mons. Versiglia visited the districts of the West (Ying Tak, Yeung Shan and Lin Chow). It was again rough going: by boat and often on foot along the river banks pulling the craft along as the boat people would often do. The journey, however, consoled the bishop immensely: in several places many people would receive holy communion, youngsters would show the greatest fervour, holy baptism and confirmation would be administered and pagans would come forward to be instructed in the Catholic religion. When Monsignor arrived back in Shiu Chow after a month's absence he celebrated the feastday of St. Joseph at Ho Sai and blessed the newly acquired bell for the church.

After Easter, he set out to visit the districts in the north (Lok Chong and Yan Fa). The journey was done mostly on foot because his horse had died on the eve of his departure. Again discomforts mixed with consolations; again sadness at the scarcity of means and the poverty of the mission stations.

Mons. Versiglia goes to Italy to attend the General Chapter

The General Chapter for the election of the Superior General, following the death of Fr. Paul Albera, was opened on 23rd April, 1922. In those days the Society's Vicars and Prefects Apostolic had a right to take part.

Mons. Versiglia impressed many chapter members by his wisdom and some even thought of electing him Rector Major. The possibility was ruled out, however, by the Moderator of the Chapter who thought it would not be possible for a member of the hierarchy to become Superior General of a religious Congregation. The chapter concluded, the members visited the native place of Don Bosco at Becchi. Mons. Versiglia celebrated Holy Mass for all and Card. Cagliero preached the homily. At the cheerful dinner that followed toasts were offered in many languages, one of them by the Bishop in Chinese. Then Monsignor embarked on a heavy tour of Italy, Spain, France, Switzerland and Germany to speak to people about his mission: his efforts paid off handsomely in terms of moral and financial support.

He was also able to kindle the missionary vocation in a good number of young clerics who declared themselves ready to leave with him for China. Among them Bro. Callistus Caravario, who later would share with him the crown of martyrdom.

Many however of these generous people were unable to fulfil their desire. When Mons. Versiglia left for China, only two confreres, a priest and a lay-brother, embarked with him. Unfortunately they were no longer young and, once in the mission, found adaptation to the new environment too much for them, so that their stay in China was rather short.

Mons. Versiglia this time led the first group of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to his mission: they were six in number and their contribution turned out to be very valuable indeed. Their apostolate later spread to Shanghai, Macau, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines and Vietnam.

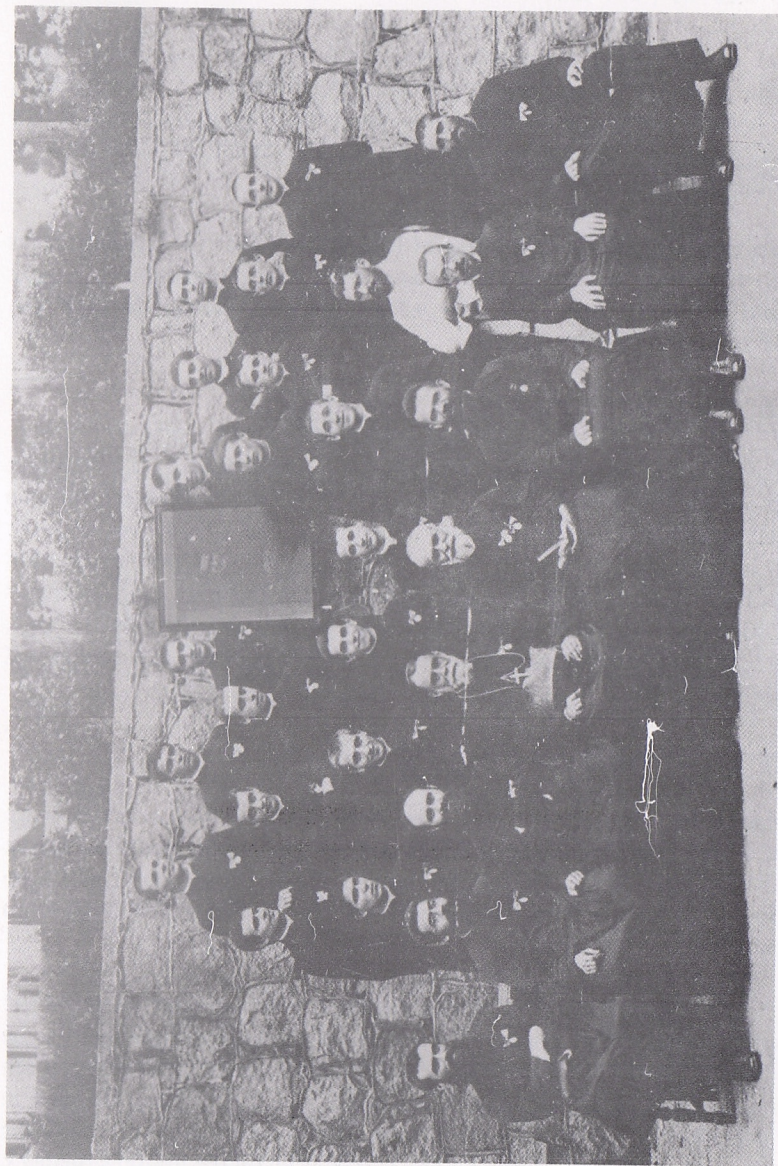
Mons. Versiglia in Shanghai to attend the first Chinese Synod

In November, 1922 the first Apostolic Delegate to China arrived in the country: he was Mons. Celso Constantini. One of the first tasks of the Delegate was the preparation of a plenary Synod for the whole of China. The Synod opened in the church of St. Ignatius, Zikawei (Shanghai) on 15th May, 1924 with the participation of 42 bishops, 5 prefects Apostolic, the mitred abbot of the Trappists, representatives from 13 missions and of several religious Institutes as well as of the local clergy. It closed on 12th June, 1924 in the same church with the solemn consecration of China to Mary Most Holy.

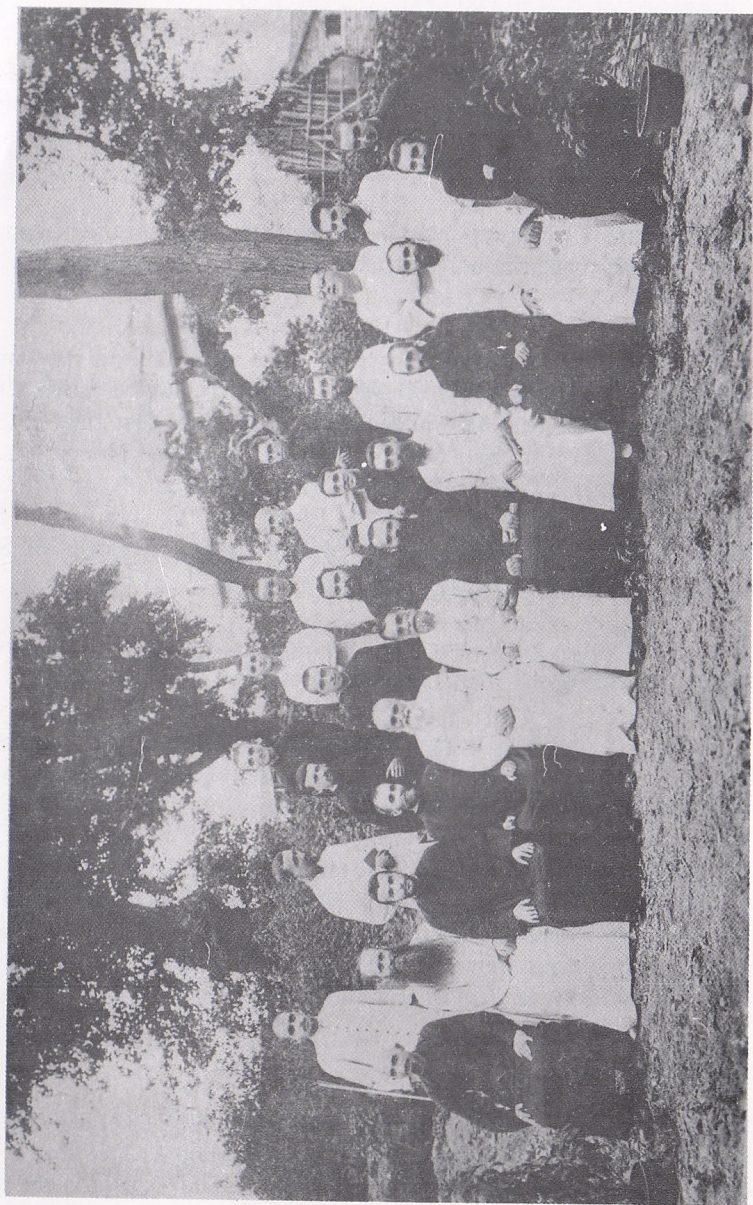
At the International Eucharistic Congress of Chicago

In a letter which arrived in Shiu Chow on 23rd April, 1926, the Superiors in Turin expressed the desire that Mons. Versiglia take part in the International Eucharistic Congress to be held in Chicago from 20th June to 26th of that year. The bishop was glad to accede to the desire of the Superiors and to have an opportunity to go round collecting funds for his mission.

The period of time that followed the Congress was spent in various apostolic activities: the preaching of retreats, ordinations and propaganda talks. Monsignor spent some time also in Canada for the same purposes. He was about to leave the country, when he had a serious attack of appendicitis. Admitted to the Notre Dame Hospital in Montreal he was successfully operated on and was treated with great kindness by the sisters. Since the bill was heavy, it was a considerable drain on the bishop's finances.



Mons. Versiglia in 1927, just back in Macau from America, with Rev. Fr. Peter Ricaldone, on the occasion of the latter's canonical visitation.



Mons. Versiglia and Rev. Fr. P. Ricaldone in Shiu Chow after the spiritual retreat.

In view of this a fellow-patient decided to foot Monsignor's bill altogether but the Hospital's administration while thanking the generous benefactor, would not be outdone in generosity and cancelled all of Monsignor's dues.

While in hospital, the bishop was offered the book "The Spirit of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus" to read. At first his impression was that it was sweetish stuff for women but on perusing it a second time he discovered the treasures of virtue the candid soul hid and became a devout admirer of the Saint.

In our archives we have a Chinese translation of the same book: in the margin we often notice the Hak-Ka romanization of difficult Chinese characters written by the bishop himself.

Mons. Versiglia returned to New York and spend some more time in the United States in preaching and collecting funds. Finally he left for China after Easter 1927. Those fortunate enough to meet him in those days remember that they noticed greater holiness in him and a stronger desire of heaven. He reached Macau on 23rd May, 1927 and there met Fr. Peter Ricaldone, Prefect General of the Salesians, then on an extra-ordinary visitation to the Far East. After the feastday of Mary Help of Christians had been duly celebrated, Mons. Versiglia departed for Shiu Chow and Fr. Ricaldone for Shanghai and Japan.

After his trip to that country, the Visitor preached a spiritual Retreat to the Confreres in Macau and then on 9th August arrived in Shiu Chow.

Here he embarked on a long and tiring visit to the various districts of the mission and was able to see for himself the hardships his confreres were putting up with in their work of evangelization.

In September Fr. Ricaldone preached another retreat to the Missionaries and took part in the customary meetings they held. He was also honoured with enthusiasm by the pupils of the Salesians and of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Various and difficult problems were also discussed by the bishop and the visitor: their successful solution, however, had to wait quite some years.

A journey to Kiang-si

Mons. O'Shea, an American Lazarist, bishop elect of Kan-chow had cordially invited Mons. Versiglia to attend his ordination ceremony. The bishop decided that it was his duty to comply, since the fathers had always been so kind to him in the past;

so, although he had to cover 400 Kms, the weather was rainy, and the region mountainous and inhospitable, he set out for Kan-Chow with Fr. Dalmasso. On his arrival he was welcomed by four bishops of the region who were delighted to see him and were grateful for his kind-heartedness. He spent three days in Kan-Chow and was much admired and sought after. On 2nd May, 1928 he left the city and in the company of Fr. Stauble, a Lazarist missionary, travelled for four days on end until he reached his mission in the evening of 5th May. Both travellers were very tired, but on the following day, a Sunday, Monsignor administered confirmation to some 15 Christians, preached, heard confessions and spent his time with the boys as though he were rested and relaxed. It was typical of this great salesian missionary.

Mons. Versiglia's crosses

Bishop Versiglia had many crosses to carry throughout his lifetime. Some of them were connected with the chaotic state of things in China in those days. To the reader of the history of that great nation it appears at once that those were times of disorders caused by the unsettled political situation and of humiliations heaped upon the country by foreign imperialist powers. Without attempting to pass judgement on political matters, I shall write of the facts connected with Monsignor's life and apostolate as well as of the amount he had to suffer.

The Civil War

For a number of years after the overthrow of the Manchu Dynasty, the Central Government in Peking had little control over the country as a whole. Those who practically held power were the so called "war-lords", generals in command of mercenary troops who fought among themselves for territory and power. There was therefore unending warring, with consequent destruction, extortion and vandalism. The mission of Shiu Chow was situated right in the way of the armies that travelled north and south. Continuous disorders made the work of the missionaries hazardous and threatened their very lives. Fighting was accompanied by widespread banditry. Thus Mons. Versiglia had to carry a heavy cross that worried him all the time, frustrated his efforts and made his apostolate very difficult.

The Revolution

On the heels of the civil war there followed the revolution, a danger even more serious.

In 1912 Dr. Sun Yat-sen (the Father of the Country) had established the Kwomintang,

which party in late 1913 had been outlawed by the Peking government as a seditious organization. In 1920 Dr. Sun re-organized it and in 1921 he was elected President by the separatist government of Canton.

Thus two governments were in existence in China in those days, although only the one in Peking enjoyed diplomatic recognition.

It was in 1921 that Dr. Sun, badly in need of foreign help, turned to the Soviet Union, the self-proclaimed champion of anti-imperialism.

China was promised help to achieve unity and independence: thus under the guise of nationalism communism made its appearance in China.

Russian instructors, both military and political, set about organizing unions and cells to spread the new ideology from Moscow.

Their heated propaganda gave rise to a wave of xenophobia and hatred of religion, described as an ally of imperialism.

Widespread attacks against foreigners and the missions took place: the intention was to alienate the foreign powers from China and thus ensure easy domination and exploitation by the Russians.

The mission of Shiu Chow was not exempt from trouble: repeated attempts were made to occupy the schools and the Bishop's house and to stir up trouble against the missionaries.

At Nam Yung on the occasion of Christmas 1925 Fr. Dalmasso and his Christians were celebrating the feast when they were besieged in the mission compound by a crowd of fanatics who smashed the windows and poured all sorts of insults on the priest and the faithful.

At Shiu Chow the two schools run by the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians enjoyed high esteem and so they were targets of envy and eventual attacks. The local student's League, self-styled nationalist, but actually communist was quite strong. Fr. C. Braga, the Principal of the Don Bosco School, conceived the brilliant idea of having the best pupils of the two schools enrol in the league; at the same time by means of suitable lectures he trained them to counteract the anti-religious tendencies of the organization. Naturally vehement verbal clashes occurred, from which however our students emerged victorious. On one occasion,

at Christmas, an attack planned against the mission failed due to the prompt intervention of the students of the mission schools who managed to give a patriotic rather than an anti-religious colour to the manifestation.

In passing I shall point out that among those students who took part in the above-mentioned struggles was also Miss Mary Tong Su-lien, one of the three young women for whose protection Mons. Versiglia gave up his life.

In 1926 General Chiang Kai-shek clashed with the Communists, expelled them from the Party and set about exterminating them: then the anti-religious movement abated, but its consequences remained. Mons. Versiglia suffered a great deal as he witnessed the upheavals and realized how easily the materialistic propaganda had poisoned the minds of the Chinese people and how more difficult evangelization had been made.

Poverty

The utter poverty of the mission was the source of great suffering for Bishop Versiglia. Many other missions were supported by the finances of their procurations which owned considerable estates and capital. The Salesians, bound by rule to own only their own dwellings and the works for their apostolate, did not have much to offer by way of monetary assistance. The mission as such possessed little: a few fields produced a modest income for the benefit of the local associations. The Society in charge of celebrations catered for the material needs of the faithful when religious festivals were held; the Society of a Happy Death defrayed the expenses for the burial of poor Christians; the Society of Holy Souls saw to it that due suffrages were offered for the faithful departed.

On such meagre income the vicariate had little chance to prosper at all. The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith granted a yearly subsidy, which however was largely insufficient; friends of the missions used to offer monetary help urged on by the Bishop personally or through his letters; yet financially the mission was far from stable and Monsignor Versiglia was perpetually in financial straits. He hoped his vicariate would prosper and his missionaries enjoy a decent standard of living. His priests never complained about their personal poverty but it was inevitable that too many deprivations would seriously affect their health.

The insufficient number of missionaries

This was another worry for the Bishop. Following the two groups of new missionaries

who arrived in China in 1918 and 1919, no other expeditions were sent out. From 1920 to 1930 14 confreres joined the China mission: three of them failed to stay on, four had to leave the vicariate for various reasons and two passed away. Thus the actual increase in personnel was by five confreres only. Of these Fr. Caravario suffered martyrdom just half a year after ordination and Fr. Geder, the latest arrival, reached the mission a few days before the Bishop met his glorious death in February 1930. Several confreres were busy at headquarters to take care of the School, the Seminary and the Sisters: at one time only eight missionaries were actually working in the various districts.

The most painful thorn

Mons. Versiglia was deeply attached to Don Bosco and the Congregation. Imagine how much he suffered when he was accused before the major superiors in Turin of being reluctant to apply the method and spirit of Don Bosco in the organization of the mission. He had worked so hard all the time to establish orphanages and schools in the salesian tradition; he indeed desired that his confreres could lead a community life in groups, yet with the small number available he hardly managed to look after his scattered christians let alone expanding the work of evangelization. He explained the situation to the Superiors and Fr. Rinaldi indeed understood it and sympathized with him; others, however, did not and the misunderstanding was the most painful one in the bishop's crown of thorns.

Mons. Versiglia's virtues

To deal with this topic exhaustively would greatly increase the length of this work of mine. I will do it briefly, hoping that even a short presentation will portray the holiness of the bishop sufficiently well.

His Eucharistic piety

Monsignor's soul was a deeply Eucharistic one. Whenever you happened to go to pay him a visit and failed to seem him in his office, you would most certainly find him praying in his private chapel. Very early in the morning he would go there for meditation and holy mass: the latter would always be preceded by diligent preparation and followed by fervent thanksgiving. Bishop Versiglia often visited the Blessed Sacrament during the day to recite the divine office, to attend to spiritual reading and to pray the Rosary. In the evening he used to spend quite some time in the chapel before retiring for the night.

His devotion to Our Lady of Help of Christians

Having learned it in Valdocco, he practised it during his whole life and spread it with enthusiasm wherever he went. He had his mission consecrated to the Blessed Mother and recited countless rosaries particularly during his long journeys. One of the chains of his episcopal cross was fashioned after the chaplet and it was not meant for mere ornament. "A missionary without devotion to Our Lady Help of Christians is nothing," he used to say.

His charity and zeal

Long before it was proclaimed far and wide that authority is meant for service, Mons. Versiglia, urged on by charity loved to make himself available to all, especially his missionaries, attending to their needs with fatherly foresight, humble services and constant care whenever they fell sick. He would often visit the kindergarten and the home for the aged, both in the care of the Salesian Sisters. His fatherly goodness acted as a real magnet that elicited the innocent love of the little children and the gratitude of the old folk.

His zeal was enterprising. While on his journeys he would exhort, preach, hear confessions and address a good word also to the pagans he met. In the early days of the orphanage in Ho Sai Monsignor used to teach catechism to the boys there. Some time later, when in Ho Sai there dwelt catechumens and neophytes, he would visit them in the evenings accompanied by a catechist, by Salesian Sisters and by some of the latter's pupils in order to teach them the catholic doctrine. You would see him head his fellow teachers holding an oil lamp and enter the poor houses of the local peasants whose only time free from their daily toil was the evening. The team would then return to the mission compound late at night praying the rosary together.

When the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians established a school for the training of catechists, Mons. Versiglia, heedless of fatigue, used to travel there to give them lectures on religious knowledge.

For the Sisters he was a spiritual guide and a wise master of ascetics. We still possess in the archives some talks he gave them and many outlines of others, jotted down on scraps of paper in small thick handwriting.

His profound humility

When Fr. Versiglia suspected that he might be made a bishop, he wrote several

letters to his Superiors begging them not to set their eyes on him: not that he was bent on shirking work or lacked zeal; he sincerely felt he was not the man for such high office: his conviction was with him throughout his life. In his late years he was heard to say that he was just a nuisance, that it would be better for him to leave this world soon because anybody else would be much more successful in his place. He was indeed so sincere in saying this that his humility appeared to all people as his characteristic virtue.

His penances

Most of the Bishop's penances remained secret during his lifetime; however, particularly in his last years, it became evident that he had offered himself a victim to God for the sake of his mission: his behaviour and his growing acts of mortification proved it beyond doubt. After his death a hair-shirt, a scourge and other instruments of penance were found in his possession. It was then that people understood the reason behind some of his ways and behind blood stains on his personal linen, although he always took great care to rinse them before he sent them for laundering.

Spiritual consolation

The Carmelite nuns of the monastery of St. Theresa in Florence in those days used to offer up to God prayers and penances for the benefit of Mons. Versiglia and his missionaries. He was greatly consoled and encouraged by their generosity and zeal. In 1923 he had started a warm relationship with the nuns and had made a pact of mutual spiritual aid with them. We do not possess the letters he received from the nuns but the latter still treasure those written by him. Writing to souls that understood him well, he would open his heart to them in holy thoughts and lively expressions of sincere gratitude and deep humility.

FR. CALLISTUS CARAVARIO (1903–1930)

His childhood

Callistus Caravario was born at Cuorgne, a small town in the Canavese region of Piedmont (Northern Italy) on 8th June, 1903. From his family of good hard-working people he learned the love of God, of work and of retirement.

In his childhood he showed great interest in God and deep attachment to his mother. He enjoyed going to church to pray and spending his time near his mother, while brother and sister would go to play with their peers.

His early schooling

When the boy was five he followed his family to Turin and there he attended a public primary school for three years, well known to his lady teachers for his intelligence and goodness. He also studied religious knowledge in his parish and impressed the nuns who taught him there. One of them even suggested to his mother that one day little Callistus might become a priest.

At seven he received his first holy communion with great devotion. He had obtained from his mother permission to prepare for it with two companions of his in a three day retreat with the nuns of the Cenacle.

Callistus attends the Oratory of St. Joseph and the school of St. John the Evangelist

The boy soon discovered that near his home there existed the Salesian Oratory of St. Joseph; he started attending it at once; it was here that he came to know Fr. Sante Garelli who was to be his future superior in Shanghai.

Young Callistus did not feel too much at ease in the public school and his grades were not good either, so mother sent him to study two more years of primary at the Salesian School of St. John the Evangelist in Turin, which he attended as a day boy. It was here that one of his young teachers was Bro. Charles Braga, who later would be a missionary in China.

At the new school the boy felt very much at home and soon became not only a model student but also a veritable apostle. He already had in mind to become a priest and in his prayers he used to ask Jesus the grace to imitate St. Aloysius' purity and to become a priest.



Fr. C. Caravario.

At the Oratory in Valdocco

In order to follow his vocation, Callistus had to continue his studies; his family, however, being poor, was unable to help him. It was Fr. Garelli who intervened then and found some benefactors who helped him. Thus the lad was able to join the Oratory in Valdocco and to start his secondary education in October, 1914. In Valdocco he spent four useful years, distinguishing himself for piety and study and always managing to stay top of his class.

During his holidays he would attend the Oratory of St. Joseph where he offered his help in supervising and teaching his younger companions. On weekdays, the Oratory being closed, he loved staying at home with mother while his brother and sister went about their noisy games.

When in Valdocco he used to enjoy the company of missionaries who occasionally visited the Salesian Motherhouse and was often seen with Fr. Maggiorino Borgatello, an old missionary from Patagonia, who spent the last few years of his life at Valdocco.

The Salesian Cleric

On completing his fourth year of secondary education, Callistus applied to join the Salesian Society and was accepted. In August 1918 he went to Foglizzo to start his year of novitiate; his master was Fr. Dominic Canepa, a holy man who formed hundreds of youngsters to the Salesian way of life. Novice Callistus although still quite young, showed great maturity of thought, prudence in reasoning and outstanding humility and piety.

On 19th September, 1919 he made his religious profession and proceeded to Valsalice to conclude his secondary studies and start his three year course of philosophy.

The students at Valsalice on Sundays used to go to help out in the local festive oratories. Callistus would have loved to go to his old oratory of St. Joseph but unfortunately the latter had been closed down because of the war, so the young cleric was sent to that of St. Aloysius where he continued with maturity and zeal the work he had started years before in the old place.

He was a responsible supervisor and a good catechist, particularly zealous at promoting vocations: several boys of the oratory undertook the priestly career urged on by his words and examples. In 1922 Mons. Versiglia spent a few days in Turin; it was then that Bro. Caravario with some companions of his went to visit him and to tell him



Bro. C. Caravario as a student at Valsalice
(sitting at left hand side of Superior, Fr. V. Cimatti)



Bro. C. Caravario, as a teacher at the St. John the Evangelist School in Turin.

that they wanted to go to China with him. His superiors did not agree to the idea as their intention was that he should complete his studies before doing anything else.

He willingly complied and sat his public exams with brilliant results. In the school year 1923–1924 Bro. Caravario was at Valdocco as supervisor of the apprentices. It was in November, 1923 that through some missionaries who were leaving for China he sent a letter to Fr. C. Braga asking him to be allowed to join the China mission.

Bro. Callistus leaves for China

In 1924 the Salesians were about to open a technical school in Shanghai. Fr. Garelli, who had returned from Macau the preceding year, was put in charge of the new school and was preparing the necessary personnel to staff it. Bro. Caravario asked him to intercede with his superiors that he might leave with him for China.

Permission was granted and our Callistus on 7th October, 1924 left Turin for Genoa and in the evening of that day embarked for the Far East. Leaving his family behind was indeed painful for him but his ardent prayer obtained courage and generosity from God. Fr. Garelli was unable to depart with him because in that year the missionaries being rather numerous were unable to find accomodation on board the same ship. He led the first batch to Genoa and then went back to Turin planning to join the second group. The first group was led by Fr. Anthony Martin who was accompanied by Bros. Caravario and Fontana, by lay-brother O. Fantini (a veteran of the China mission) and by two aspirants, all of them destined for Shanghai. There were also two clerics for Macau and eight novices (among whom the future Mons. M. Arduino) heading for the novitiate house of Ho Sai. Fr. Martin who suffered from intense migraine, spent most of the journey in his cabin, so the actual leaders of the group were Bros. Caravario and Fontana; as Bro. Fontana, however, was not too well either, the responsibility fell on Bro. Caravario: he would look after every aspect of life on board the ship, from meditation in the morning to the good-night talk after evening prayers.

The journey was a happy one. The ship reached Hong Kong on 10th November, 1924 and the following day our travellers were in Macau. Here Bro. Callistus was delighted to meet Fr. C. Braga who had come from Shiu Chow to accompany the novices to their destination.

In Shanghai

The confreres destined for Shanghai continued their journey after their stop-over in Macau and reached the great metropolis on 20th November. The wellknown local catholic philanthropist Mr. Joseph Lo Pa Hong was then building a trade school next to the extensive St. Joseph Hospice he had established some years before. He had asked the Salesians to run the school. When they arrived the latter was still being built, so they took advantage of their time on hand to study the local language.

On 16th January, 1925 Fr. Garelli and his companions joined the first arrivals: on the 24th of the same month the new orphanage was opened and before long housed around a hundred poor boys.

Living daily with the lads, Bro. Caravario felt the need to learn the language ever more keenly; his efforts paid off and in a month's time he was already able to teach the boys his first catechism lesson in Chinese. At the end of that year he managed to give his first talk during a programme held in honour of Our Lady Immaculate.

As soon as the building was completed and the number of boys increased, Brother found himself quite busy with supervision, the teaching of catechism to his catechumens and neophytes as well as of other subjects.

He enjoyed the complete trust of his Superior and was considered his right arm by all. As keen as ever on promoting vocations, brother was able to recruit a few aspirants whom he happily taught the rudiments of the Latin language.

The Salesians are forced to leave Shanghai

Unfortunately the civil war we mentioned above came to interrupt the activities of the Salesians in Shanghai. Business came to a standstill and Mr. Lo Pa Hong, who was a shrewd and successful business man, suddenly found himself unable to go on supporting his charitable works. Many boys of the school were sent back home and several Salesians who became redundant were ordered south to Macau. Bro. Caravario was one of them: leaving Shanghai cost him a great deal but with God's help he took it in his stride, always loyal to his missionary vocation.

Brother is sent to Timor

After spending a few weeks in Macau, Brother left for Dili, the capital city of the then Portuguese portion of the island of Timor in the East Indies. The Bishop of



Bro. C. Caravario with Fr. S. Garelli in Shanghai.

Macau, to whose jurisdiction Timor belonged, had entrusted the care of a local parish to the Salesians, who were about to open a trade school there as well.

In Timor there lived a small Portuguese Community, made up mostly of political deportees; the local population, of Malay race, was good-natured but not very active: this was due to the enervating heat of the place and also to the fact that the fertile soil did not need much cultivation to support the livelihood of the people.

Bro. Caravario blessed with unbeatable patience, started learning the Portuguese as well as the local language and before long was able to communicate and to teach fairly well.

During his two year stay in Timor he concluded his studies of theology and prepared earnestly for the priesthood with the reading of appropriate books of an ascetical nature.

In Timor, just as in Shanghai, he had to put up with several discomforts, which he, however, managed to keep hidden; what was not possible to hide were several attacks of malaria which drained much of his energy but never discouraged him; as the fever abated, he would be back at his work.

In spite of his poor health, brother used to spend his time of recreation with the boys, quite keen as he was on keeping them happy: of course it was no small sacrifice for him in the trying climate of the place. Ordination year for brother was to be 1928: unfortunately neither the bishop of far away Macau nor the one of the nearby diocese was available and brother had to wait and use the delay to make a better preparation for the great event of his life.

The Salesians withdraw from Timor

The Salesian community did not work for long in Timor: problems arose with the parish and the trade school proved less useful than expected in the local situation. There was not much need of tailoring or shoe-making in that tropical region; cabinet making and mechanical engineering were little necessary in a place where there existed hardly any industry at all.

Thus the Salesians were withdrawn to Macau. It cost brother Caravario a great deal leaving Dili on 3rd April, 1929: the boys he loved and by whom he was truly loved were in tears when they saw him off at the pier. Fifteen days later he was in Hong Kong.

He looked lean and tired but impressed everybody by his prudence and charity. Nasty rumours were circulating about the departure of the Salesians from Timor: Bro. Caravario, when asked for explanations, would wisely avoid the issue and speak instead of the goodness of the Timorese people and especially of the boys.

He never uttered a word of blame, as is testified by people who knew him well.

At last Bro. Caravario is ordained a priest

Brother was then sent to the mission of Shiu Chow, where the dream of his lifetime finally came true. He prepared for the great event in deep recollection and received the subdiaconate from Mons. Versiglia on 9th May, 1929, the diaconate three days later and the holy priesthood on 18th May, the eve of Pentecost. The following day he solemnly sang his first holy mass. Confreres, students, seminarians and lay folk waited in vain for him to emerge from the church after the service: there he was all absorbed in devout thanksgiving, oblivious of everything else. A confrere of his had to go and bring him out to the cheers of his well-wishers. A pleasant surprise filled the new priest with joy during the entertainment held in his honour that evening: a boy read an address of congratulations in Italian and Fr. Caravario discovered that it was the very same address he had delivered in honour of Fr. C. Braga on the occasion of the latter's priestly ordination in 1914.

Fr. Callistus then rose to thank all his friends partly in Hak-ka and partly in English. His ability to express himself in both languages was no small surprise to all present.

Fr. Caravario the missionary

Mons. Versiglia used to keep his new missionaries with himself for half a year in order to train them in pastoral work. Fr. Caravario was an exception and was sent to Linchow hardly two months after ordination. The bishop thought that the young priest was already quite mature; the climate in Linchow was good and would benefit Fr. Callistus who was still feeling the effects of his stay in Timor; in Linchow there was a boarding school and the boys would help father in learning the Hak-ka dialect, and finally he would be trained by Fr. G. Guarona, a veteran of the mission, who was then in charge in Linchow. Yet young Fr. Callistus hardly needed any training at all.

As his knowledge of the language improved, his zeal also increased; at first he would converse with the boys, then in the company of the catechist he would visit Christian families: he would let his companion speak and would put in a few words of his own; however it was not long before he managed to speak to the faithful directly. Thus

it was due to his determination that he soon managed to deliver goodnight talks to the students and sermons to the faithful. He delighted in visiting the sick and administering the sacraments to them. Long distances were travelled by young Fr. Caravario who showed a great spirit of adaptation and sacrifice.

Fr. Guarona later declared that he had little to teach his charge and on the contrary he learned quite a few lessons from him. He admired his charity, his prudence and the maturity one would expect of an experienced priest. The fervour of his first holy mass never decreased: a sign of the great depth of his virtue. Before long Fr. Guarona felt that the new missionary would fend on his own quite successfully and left him, coming back to spend a few days with him once a month. The love of souls helped Fr. Caravario to accept the added penance of a lonely way of life.

THE LAST JOURNEY

Mons. Versiglia, because of the unsettled situation, had had to postpone his intended pastoral visit to Linchow, but eventually he decided he would definitely make it in February 1930; so he invited Fr. Caravario to come to Shiu Chow and thence to travel together back to Lin Chow. Fr. Callistus received a warm welcome from the boys of the Don Bosco School, particularly from those of his own district. His stay was a veritable mission as he spent his time giving them some useful advice, which actually was to be his last to his friends. He spent long hours in the church before the Blessed Sacrament and on Sunday, 23rd, the eve of his departure; the whole day, leaving it only to go to take his lunch and dinner.

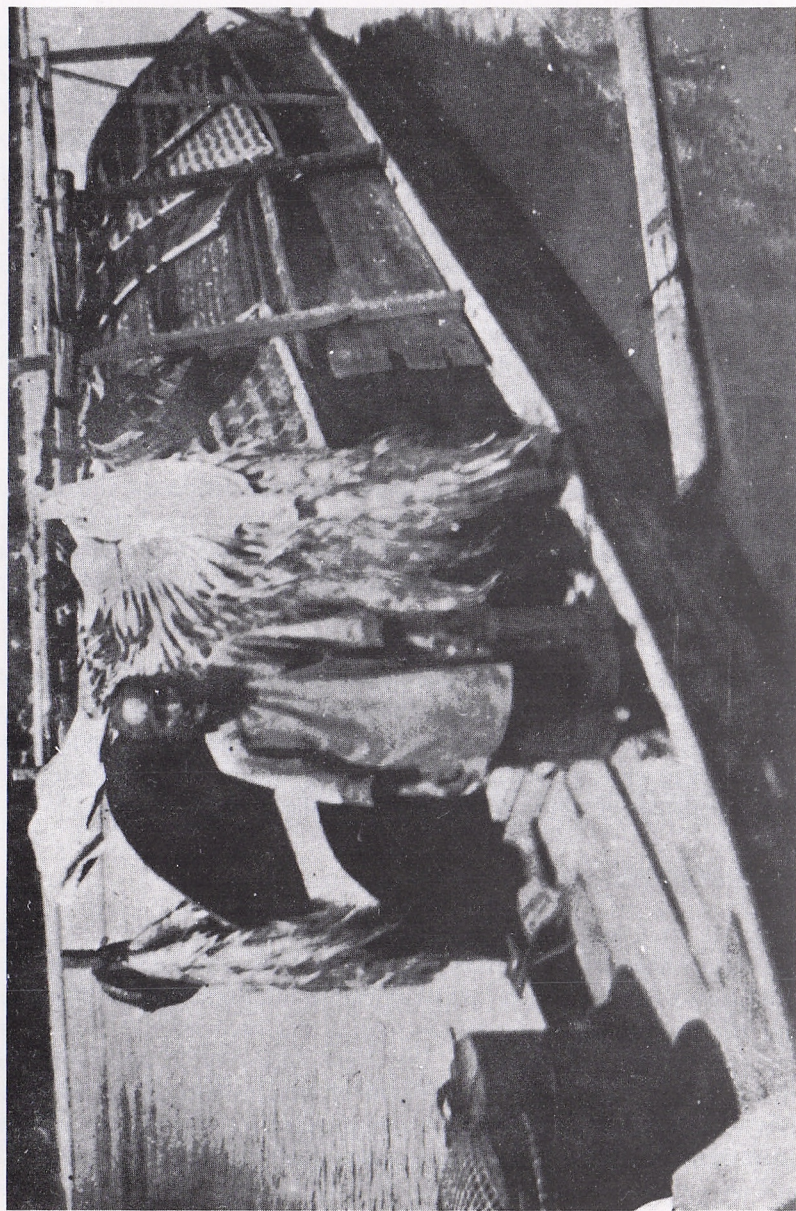
Mons. Versiglia meanwhile concluded his visit to the district of Nam Yung, which bore much fruit in spite of the freezing temperature of January.

During his absence work progressed in earnest to adapt the house of Hoi Sai for use by the seminarians who so far had been lodging in the bishop's house. They moved into the new place on February 22nd and on the same day Mons. Versiglia inaugurated the seminary with a talk to his seminarians in the church of St. Joseph followed by benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

On the 23rd he celebrated holy mass for the students of the Don Bosco School and delivered what was to be his last sermon. In the afternoon he preached in the chapel of the Salesian Sisters; the topic was a surprising one: he spoke of a happy death.

In the evening after prayers he gave the goodnight talk to the boys of the Don Bosco School in their study-hall and spoke of a long journey that would take him far, far away, farther than Nanking and Peking. . . he reminded them that the following day was the 24th of the month and recommended devotion to Mary Help of Christians and the imitation of her virtues.

On the 24th very early in the morning Mons. Versiglia celebrated holy mass in the chapel of the Sisters and at half past five the travelling party was ready to leave. It was made up of the Bishop, Fr. Caravario, and two young teachers who had graduated from the Don Bosco School: one still a pagan, 20 year old Tong Chong-wai and the other, a Christian, 23 year old Ng Pan-chiu Anthony, both of them already married. With them were three young ladies: the newly trained teacher Tong Su-lien Mary, 21, sister of Chong-wai and Ng Yu-che Pauline, 16, sister of Anthony. The latter was giving up her studies and returning home while Mary was going to say



The boat in which the two martyrs made their last journey.

good-bye to her people because she had made up her mind to become a nun; the third one was Tzen Tz-yung Clare, a young catechist who was to work in Lin Chow.

The party was seen off at the railway station by some students of the Don Bosco School and left by the 8.10 train for Lin Kong How. On board they were approached by three soldiers who inquired of the Bishop about their destination and the reason for their journey. Mary Tong felt quite uneasy about all this but did not know how to intervene; at last she managed to wink at Monsignor to let him know to be careful; she had recognized one of the three as a fanatical opponent of the mission. The bishop himself remembered that one of them had attempted to occupy the bishop's house some time before; however, gentleman that he was, he treated the fellows with great politeness. The party reached Lin Kong How at 5:00 p.m. and were welcomed by the priest in charge Fr. John E. Cavada. They had supper at the mission and then dispersed for the night: Monsignor and the two fathers stayed at the mission, the two young men went back to guard the boat where the luggage had been loaded and the women to the house of the local lady catechist.

On the morning of 25th February, after holy mass had been celebrated, the travellers embarked. Two persons now joined them: a ten year old boy, Peter Luk A-piao who was off to Lin Chow to study and an elderly Christian woman who was also going to Lin Chow: she would live there with the lady catechist Tzen, who was still too young to be left on her own.

On board there travelled also the boat-mistress, an elderly woman who handled the rudder, her twenty year old son and two youngsters who would either row or propel the boat by means of long poles. The ladies sat in the stern and the men in the bows. The boat flew a flag with the words "Tin Chue Tong" (Catholic Mission) which had always been a guarantee of safety and protection for the people on board.

The pirates of the Siu Pak Kong

In those days it often happened that in the districts which our party was to cross (Ying Tak, Yeung Shan and Lin Chow) the regular troops were scarce in number because they were needed elsewhere; as a result the Siu Pak Kong (the Small Northern River) was left unpatrolled; of course, as soon as this occurred, the local pirates would take over to "protect" travellers. They were quite adept at their trade: they would collect tolls of all boats, lighten them of their cargoes and often kidnap the wealthy to obtain heavy ransoms. The river was ideal for their attacks: it wound through semi-deserted regions and several gorges provided the best spots to block the progress of any craft by shouting an order or firing a shot in the air. The boatmen

were familiar with the situation and usually offered no resistance and paid their tolls, so getting off at least with their own lives. The local people never betrayed the pirates because they were their own fellow-villagers who led double lives: peasants at their work in normal times and pirates when the situation warranted it.

Up to then the pirates had not interfered with the work of the missionaries. They had always respected them either because they were known as friends of the people or because they did not possess much money or because they were afraid of complications if they molested them. The Chinese confrere Michael Leung had once been arrested by the pirates while on his way from Lin Chow to Siu Chow, but had been released when it became known that he belonged to the catholic mission. Fr. Guarona was once travelling on foot along the river; an armed man stopped him and said politely, "Father, please wait a while here: down stream we are having some business!" Father complied and after a while he heard shots being fired and then a whistle: it was the signal of "mission accomplished". The pirate then said, "Father, now you may go on" and disappeared up the mountain. Father later came to know that some boats had been stopped and robbed. Even Fr. Caravario once while travelling towards Lin Kong How on his way to Shiu Chow had bumped into a group of armed men who had boarded his craft. Realising the presence of a poor priest with a few pieces of baggage, they made no fuss about it but after travelling for about two hours with him, disembarked quietly and went on their own business. Thus the missionaries felt that travelling even in those regions infested by pirates did not constitute any serious risk.

Why then did sudden tragedy strike Monsignor and his companions on that fateful 25th February 1930? The pirates who attacked them were not just "benign" local robbers; some of them were ex-soldiers poisoned by subversive, anti-religious and xenophobic propaganda.

It is also possible that the attack was planned by those soldiers who had travelled with our party by train and knew both the bishop and Mary Tong Su-lien.

The encounter

The boat continued the journey upstream slowly and, at around nine, Monsignor and Fr. Caravario with the two teachers disembarked and followed the craft proceeding on foot along the bank. They crossed a small village called "Silver Brook" (Pak Ngan Hang) where, being market day, they noticed a good number of people, among whom some armed with rifles and revolvers. Were they the local militia or pirates? Probably, as stated above, they were both. They looked surprised at seeing foreigners;

Monsignor greeted them politely and received an equally polite reply.

Our travellers pursued their journey and at eleven boarded the boat again. Monsignor and Fr. Caravario then had their lunch and the craft which had stopped for a while sailed on upstream approaching the place where a small river flowing from Sui Pin emptied itself into the Siu Pak Kong; at the confluence of the two rivers the land looked like a ploughshare and so got the Chinese name "Lai-tau-tsui".

The Angelus having been recited, Monsignor was having his forty winks while Fr. Caravario recited the prayers of the hours.

Suddenly a command rang out from land, "Stop the boat!" Around ten armed people stood there menacingly.

"Who is on board?"

"The Bishop and a catholic priest bound for Lin Chow".

"Land at once!"

"They are people of the catholic mission!"

"Land at once!"

The boatmen had no alternative but to approach the bank.

"Who protects you on your journey?" asked the pirates.

"Nobody. We have never paid any protection money to anybody!"

The pirates cursed the boatman and ordered him to pay 500 dollars "for their own upkeep". It was a considerable sum and the missionaries would never carry so much money around. It was then that Fr. Caravario appeared and showed the pirates his visiting card. If they had been ordinary pirates, the incident would have come to an end then; but the fellows were not ordinary pirates; the boatman, who had some experience, later declared that they were evil people he had never met before."

The outlaws insisted on the toll to be paid and would not accept that the missionaries did not possess so much money. Starting to lose their tempers, some of them boarded the boat shouting, "Let us destroy these foreign devils!"

It was then that they caught sight of the women crouching fearfully in the bottom of the boat and praying to God for help.

"Let us take their wives!" they bawled.

"They are not our wives," intervened Fr. Caravario, "they are our pupils; do not touch them!"

The pirates were now burning with evil passion and declared that if money was not

forthcoming, they would take away the women and in case of resistance, they would beat up the missionaries.

When, however, they rushed forward to grab their prey, the two stood bravely in the way and politely tried to dissuade them from their evils plans.

"If you do not leave the boat, we will set fire to it," shouted the pirates. They hastily proceeded to heap some firewood on the bows of the boat and tried to set fire to it: luckily the wood was not dry and the bishop easily put the small fire out.

A scuffle then ensued, the outlaws attempting to get hold of the women and the missionaries fighting tooth and nail to protect them. They were hit repeatedly with sticks and the butts of rifles on their arms, chests and shoulders but resisted bravely, determined to die rather than surrender the women to the angry fellows.

It was then that two shots went off but both missed their targets and hit the sides of the boat. The struggle went on furiously until Monsignor lost strength and collapsed. Fr. Caravario being younger and stronger struggled on longer until he too was struck down.

The bandits went straight for the women; the latter desperately clung to the bishop, who, coming round for a while, held on to them and faintly begged the pirates not to take them away. Brute force prevailed and the women were captured. The outlaws had set their eyes especially on Miss Tong (this proves that the attack had been planned) and tried to tie her up: she declared that it was not necessary and taking advantage of a moment of freedom, dived into the river determined to die rather than fall into evil hands. The water, however, was shallow and the pirates grabbing her by her arms and hair, pulled her back on the bank.

"You foreign devils, come on land!" sounded a threatening voice. Fr. Caravario complied but the bishop failed to stir. The outlaws understood he was too weak to move and ordered the teacher Anthony Ng to help Monsignor out of the boat. Fr. Caravario went on begging for mercy on behalf of the women, but it was all in vain.

The two were searched: their watches and some cash Fr. Caravario possessed were taken away. The pastoral ring and cross of the bishop, however, were not touched. The two prisoners were then tied up the way those condemned to be shot are tied, i.e. by means of a rope that binds the arms behind the back but leaves the forearms and hands free; then to prevent them from fleeing into the nearby wood, they were bound together with bamboo strips.

"These foreign devils must be eliminated!" shouted one of the pirates.

"Are you not afraid of dying?" he asked the missionaries.

"We are priests. Why should we fear death?" answered the bishop.

Then two of the outlaws got hold of them and led them into the nearby bamboo thicket.

The boatmen and the two teachers were told to unload all the baggage. All articles bearing the words "Catholic Mission" were not to be taken away. The cases were then opened and the looting began: books and vestments were burnt or dumped into the river and the rest was kept apart as booty. The operation was carried out amid shouts and insults against religion: the latter would certainly be obliterated all over China once their party had gained control of the country. The two teachers were ordered to carry the loot and follow the pirates, but were unable to keep up with them and eventually were dismissed. They hurried to catch up with the boat which had already left for Lin Kong How. Arriving there at 5:00 p.m., they reported to Fr. Cavada what had happened.

Meanwhile the pirates tried to calm down the women assuring them that they would soon be set free.

Then the whole party went together into the wood; the women sat down metres away from the missionaries and realized that the two were speaking quietly to each other: they understood they were making their confession. Monsignor winked at them and looked up towards the sky to give them courage. As the brave ladies carried on praying, the pirates were annoyed and started pouring insults against religion, grabbed their rosary beads and threw them scornfully away.

The missionaries meanwhile were praying aloud.

"The two foreign devils are uttering charms against us," said the outlaws.

"We must kill them! Do you intend to die?" they asked.

"No, because you are taking away our pupils," answered the bishop.

"Strange! you said that you were ready to die and now you are no longer willing. You must die. Let us do away with them quickly, because they belong to the religion of foreign devils!"

Fr. Caravario again tried to negotiate and offered some money, "We belong to the mission of Shiu Chow. You must not abduct our pupils. If you require money, the bishop will get it for you."

"We do not need your money. We intend to kill the foreign devils, because if we set them free, they will take revenge against us!"

The two heroic men having tried every possible avenue to save the young ladies

realized that only the shedding of their own blood would appease those brutes: they decided to offer it generously without hesitation. They were then made to proceed along the trail across the wood. The women tried to follow them but were not allowed. Two pirates who were former communist soldiers, led the missionaries further into the wood. Some people who were following the scene from nearby houses heard the bishop make his last request, "I am an old man, kill me; but he is still young, spare him!" The reply was negative and the two martyrs knelt down together absorbed in deep prayer.

Meanwhile the women were taken to a small white temple on the river bank: there they sat down, very much dejected. A few moments later a few shots rang out: the sacrifice had been accomplished. Shocked and grieved, the young ladies begged the outlaws to let them go back home but they were covered with insults because they were followers of the foreign devils and of their religion.

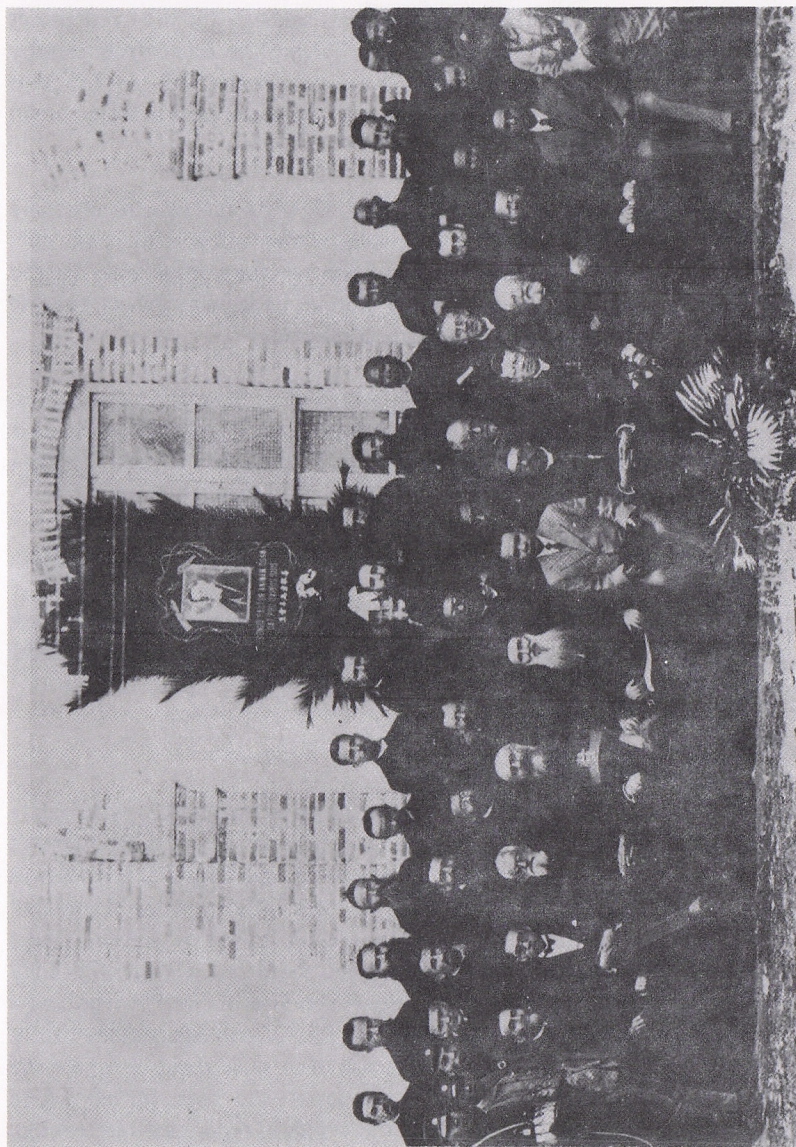
Minutes later the executioners returned and reported they had fired five times: one had fallen at once while the other had not stirred at all. Probably the first to fall had been Bishop Versiglia while Fr. Caravario, all absorbed in God, had not moved as he awaited the shot that would open the gates of heaven for him.

The executioners were told to go back and make sure the victims were really dead.

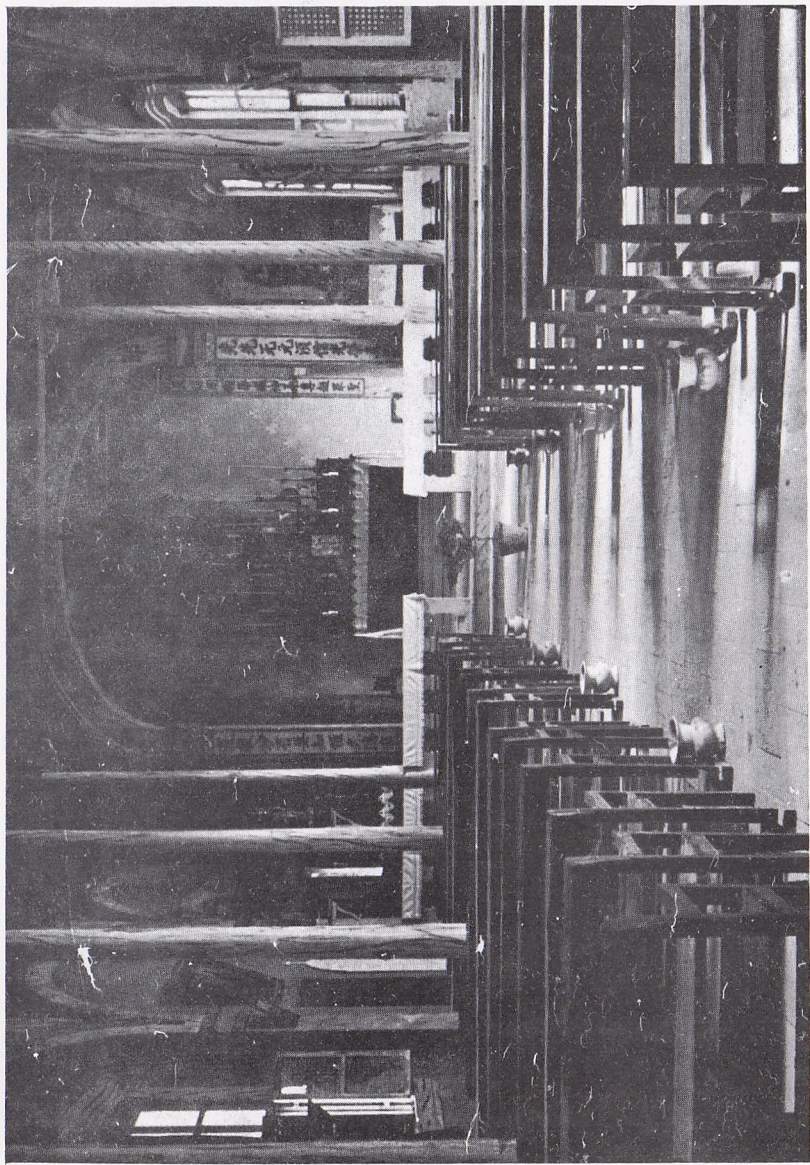
"Give a dollar to some one in the village that he may go and bury the corpses," one of the pirates suggested. The tragedy over, the outlaws fled to the mountains taking along the poor terrorized women.

The corpses are found and given final burial

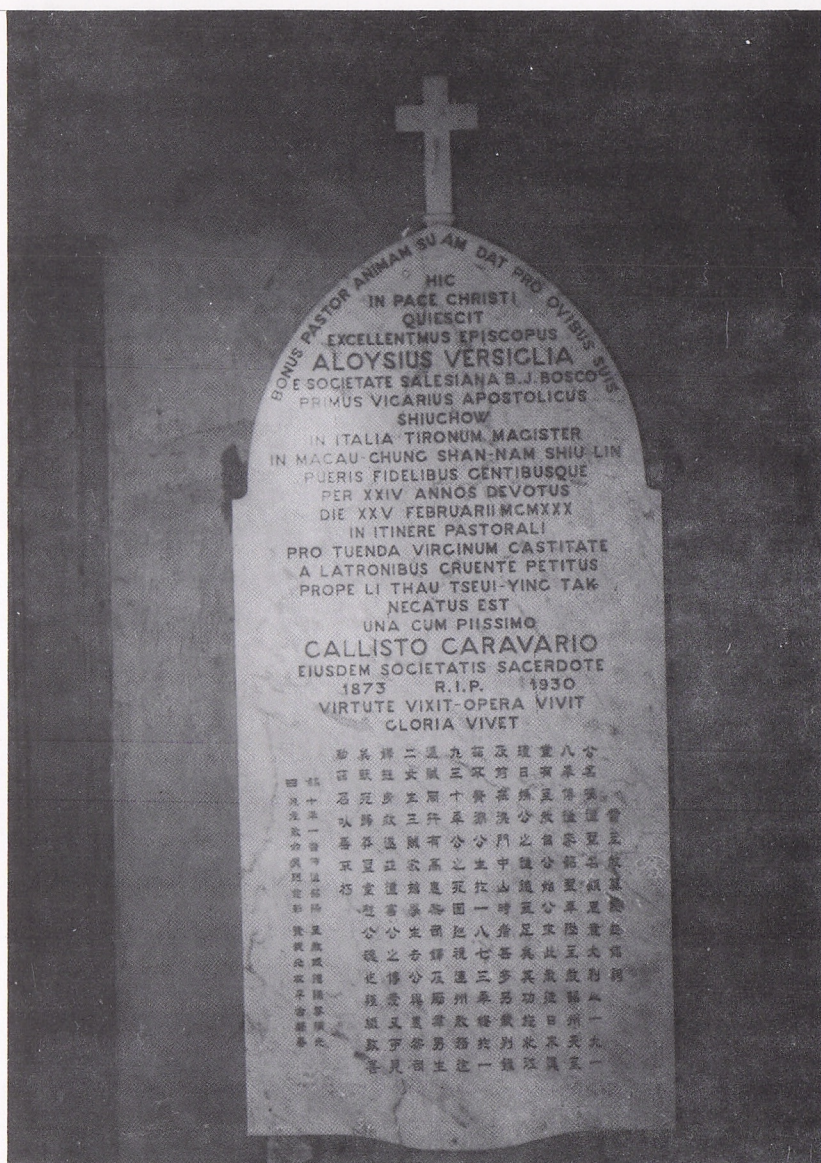
In the evening of the same day Fr. Cavada sent a telegram to Shiu Chow to relate that the Bishop and his companions had been taken by pirates. Fr. Larena, Monsignor's secretary, the following day travelled to Lin Kong How and with Fr. Cavada was soon at the place of the tragedy. They were able to learn little from the frightened local people and went to spend the night in the mission station of Sui Pin. There they learned for certain that the missionaries had been murdered. On the 27th they returned to the place in the company of the chief of police of Sui Pin who knew what had happened but pretended not to know for fear of endangering the safety of the local people. He actually carried out the search in such a way as to let the missionaries themselves discover the remains. The latter had been buried where the execution had taken place but the owner of the wood, in order to avoid trouble, had conveyed them in a boat across the Siu Pak Kong and had buried them in the



Photograph taken on the occasion of the funeral of Mons. Versiglia in Shiu Chow.



The pro-cathedral of Shiu Chow where Mons. Versiglia was buried (centre).



The memorial stone plaque in the pro-cathedral of Shiu Chow, perpetuating the glorious memory of the martyrdom of Mons. Versiglia.



The grave of Fr. C. Caravario: left hand side of the door of the Church
of St. Joseph in Ho Sai.

sand on the river bank: the boat still showed some blood stains. The sand had been carefully spread over again and bamboo branches placed over it to conceal the graves.

With the help of the chief of police the remains of the two martyrs were finally found, carried to Lin Kong How and put into two wooden coffins: they were left there until 4th March. On that day the authorities carried out the official recognition of the bodies, which were then put into two zinc coffins and conveyed to Shiu Chow. On the sixth of March Fr. Caravario was buried in Ho Sai to the left of the door of the Church of St. Joseph. Mons. Versiglia was given a very solemn funeral with participation of Bishops, Authorities, missionaries and Christians and then buried in his pro-cathedral.

Recently we received news from Shiu Chow that the cultural revolution wrought havoc also to the tombs of Mons. Versiglia and Mons. Canazei, the latter buried there as well. Some red guards invaded the pro-cathedral, opened both tombs hoping to find valuables. Finding none, they flew into a rage, burnt the remains and threw the ashes on the rubbish dump on the river bank. We have no information about the fate of the tomb of Fr. Caravario.

The Process of Beatification

The savagery of the murderers and the fanaticism of the red guards contrast sharply with the heroism of our missionaries. The process of beatification was started in late December 1934; after painstaking scrutiny, H. H. Pope Paul VI on 13th November, 1976 issued a decree by which Mons. Versiglia and Fr. Caravario were declared martyrs.

The arid soil of the mission of Shiu Chow, now made fertile by the blood of our martyrs one day will certainly bloom with Christian life to the greater glory of God and of his faithful servants.



The two glorious Salesian Protomartyrs in China, surrounded by the trophies of their sacrifice: ropes, bamboo branches and blood-stained linen.

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BLOOD ON THE RIVER BANK

(alcune spiegazioni delle illustrazioni)

The orphanage of Macau in 1906: seduti (da sinistra) Don Fergnani, Don Versiglia, Mons. Giovanni Paolino, Don Olive. 2.a linea: a sinistra il coa. Borasio, a destra il coa. Carmagnola; in alto il coa. Rota.

Fr. Versiglia and the Missionary pioneers in Heung Shan.

In alto: Don Versiglia. In basso (da sinistra) Don Bernardini, Don Pedrazzini, Don Olive.

The Episcopal Ordination: A destra di Mons. Versiglia, Mons. Nunes di Macau. Al centro il Governatore di Canton; alla sua sinistra Mons De Guebriant V.A. di Canton; in fondo alla fila Don Guarona.

Mons. Versiglia with the early pupils...A sinistra Mons. Versiglia; a destra Don Braga.

Mons. Versiglia in Turin....Al centro il Card. Cagliero; alla sua sinistra Don Rinaldi, un altro Vescovo, poi Mons. Versiglia, Don Ricaldone, ecc.

Mons. Versiglia in 1927... (da sinistra - seduti) Don Foglio, Don Bosio, Don Pasotti, Mons. Versiglia, Don Ricaldone, Don Canazei, Don Barberis, Don Garbero. Nella seconda fila dei chierici (proprio sopra D. Pasotti) il ch. Michele Arduino.

Mons. Versiglia and Rev. Fr. P. Ricaldone... Seduti (da sinistra) Don Munda, Don Ronchi, Don Braga, Don Guarona, Don Ricaldone, Mons. Versiglia, Don Canazei, Don Dalmasso, Don Bardelli, Don Cucchiara, Don Larena. In piedi: il ch. De Amicis, Don Battezzati, Don Cavada, Don Parisi, Don Ruffini, Don Correa, Don Vetch, Don Fontana, i ch. Terpin e Stacul. In alto: i ch. Pomati e Tiberi, il coad. Leung, i ch. Benato e Avalor.

Photograph taken in the occasion of the funeral...

Da sinistra (seduti) Don Guarona, il Sig. Tang, il P. xxx, Mons. xxx, Mons. Fourquet, il Mandarino di Shiu Chow, Mons. Nunes, Mons. Walsh, il P. Spada, Don Canazei, xxx.

In piedi: il ch. Spinek, D. Ricaldone, D. Dalmasso, Don Bosio, Don Wieczorek, il P. Yeung, il P. xxx, il P. xxx, il P. xxx, il P. Pierrat, il P. Ha, xxx

In alto: il ch. Benato, Don Geder, Don Ruffini, Don Fochesato, Don Barberis, Don Pamio, D. Pedrazzini, il P. D'Ayala, D. Battezzati, Don Kieschner, il P. xxx, Don Larena, Don Munda, Don Bernardini, Don Correa, xxx.

