



MORTUARY LETTER
BROTHER OTTAVIO FANTINI

HONG KONG 1991

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BROTHER OTTAVIO FANTINI

Dear Confreres,

With the death of Brother Ottavio Fantini on November 23rd. 1990 in Canossa Hospital (Hong Kong) this province has lost one of its last surviving pioneers of the Salesian apostolate in China.

Back in 1912 the Salesians were able to return to Macau and resume work at the Orphanage of the Immaculate Conception which they had had to leave in 1910, as a result of the revolution in Portugal. It was then that the Rector, Fr.Luigi Versiglia, asked our Superiors to send some more confreres to help, mentioning in particular the need for a band-master. Bro.Fantini was chosen to meet this need and arrived in Macau on December 6th. 1912.

HIS VOCATION

Ottavio was born on January 25th. 1892 at Marradi (Florence). He lost his mother, Veronica Rinaldi, when he was only four years of age; and his father, Dominic, a few years later, at Talamello Marchetino (Pesaro) where he had moved a short time before. The child lived with his grandparents who were market-gardeners, and did his share of work in the fields. He also attended school and got as far as grade three. Before long he also lost his grandparents and he was left to work with the owner of the garden-plots. This good man also managed a workshop in which Ottavio showed prowess and an eagerness to learn.

In his free time the boy would play with his companions and it appears that some of these did not behave themselves too well. Some good people showed an interest in the orphan and introduced him to the Salesians at Faenza. They provided him with some clothing and a little money and took him to meet the rector. Plans were being considered then to add to the middle school at Faenza a trade section and so the rector welcomed Ottavio and assigned him to the shoe-making department which was being run by a pious Salesian Brother. Being a smart boy Ottavio would have preferred the classroom to the workshop but, being poor, he had to settle for what was being offered him. And that was in the year 1904.

The teacher in charge of religious education would often dwell at length on the Four Last Things, depicting graphically the pains of purgatory and of hell, deeply impressing the lad and moving him to imitate Dominic Savio in his pursuit of salvation. It is in this period of his life that we can discern the budding of his religious vocation although he did not speak of it to anyone. This secret of his he preferred to keep to himself, not even sharing it with a certain Fr.Anthony, a diocesan priest living with the Salesians, who loved the boy, showed an interest

in him and guided him spiritually. Ottavio appreciated the priest's goodness and was happy when he could render him some little service. While diligently learning his trade, Ottavio also started learning to play some band instruments. He also developed an interest in athletics. Although he was not a member of the school's gymnastic team he enjoyed watching it train and managed to learn much that would prepare him for his future apostolate in China.

He was seventeen years of age when he finished his training and it was then that the rector addressed the trade-graduates, saying: "It is now the time for you to go back home or to think of going to the novitiate." Ottavio, being homeless but also being eager to ensure his spiritual welfare, opted for the novitiate.

He made known his choice to Fr. Anthony who, enthused by his choice, encouraged him to go ahead. His rector also warmly applauded his decision and accompanied him to the novitiate at San Benigno, quite close to Turin.

He made quite a hit at the novitiate, turning up wearing a fashionable hat and affectedly brandishing a walking stick, as was the habit of the young dandies of that time. His appearance gave rise to much mirth and hilarious comments among his fellow-novices. Fr. Dominic Canepa, a saintly and experienced novice-master, won Ottavio's respect, admiration, affection and confidence; and such also were the sentiments that the priest had regarding his novice.

On September 29th. 1910 he concluded his year of novitiate with his religious profession and his happiness knew no bounds on his being admitted into the Salesian Congregation. He remained at San Benigno for a further two years to perfect the craft at which he was already adept. He eventually graduated with a certificate as master shoemaker and a specialization in making ladies' footwear.

At San Benigno he learned to play well several band instruments and was a member of the band of the Institute. His proficiency in music and familiarity with several instruments enabled him, when need arose, to substitute other musicians, at San Benigno and even at Valdocco. It was precisely for this skill of his that he was chosen to go to China. A French Salesian well-versed in music put the finishing touches to his musical preparation, giving him all the personal tuition he needed before his departure for Macau.

It was in Macau that he made his final profession, on October 5th. 1913. In 1921 his eight-year spell in Macau came to an end and he returned to Italy where he was part of the Martinetto community (Turin) until 1924. It was while he was at Martinetto that, in collaboration with brother Costamagna, he published "THE MASTER SHOEMAKER", a manual of 228 pages with 500 illustrations. In the Acts of the General Council of June 24th. 1925 one can read the words of the then Councillor for Arts and Trades Schools who recommended the textbook to our personnel engaged in shoemaking.

In 1924 Brother Fantini gladly retraced his steps back to China, in response to an invitation extended to him by Fr. Sante Garelli who was looking for personnel for a new foundation in Shanghai that had been offered to us by the well-known Chinese philanthropist Mr. Lo Pa-hong.

On October 7th. 1924 he left by boat from Genoa, in the company of

several eventually outstanding Salesians: Callisto Caravario who, together with Msgr. Versiglia, would be martyred less than six years later; Ernesto Fontana who was destined to give great impulse to Salesian work in Shanghai; and the novice Michael Arduino, future Bishop of Shiuchow.

Due to the outbreak of war in Shanghai our school was obliged to close down in 1927 and Brother went down to Hong Kong where he spent one year at St. Louis School before going on to Macau where he spent the following nine years. Later we find him at Aberdeen Technical School where for three years he managed the shoemaking department and took charge of the band. World War Two obliged him to move back to Shanghai where he spent eleven years at Don Bosco School until the Red Army closed that city to foreigners. He then spent many years back in Aberdeen Technical School before returning to Salesian School in Macau. And it is here that in 1984 his superiors persuaded him to realize that he was a nonagenarian and deserving of a life of semi-retirement at the House of Formation in Hong Kong. And it was in this House at Shauiwan that he passed his last years.

HIS ACTIVITIES

Brother Fantini's main activity was that of master shoemaker. He was highly



The Master Shoemaker (Shanghai 1924-27)

esteemed in Macau for his ability in this craft and the Portuguese ladies of the enclave particularly appreciated the elegant footwear he produced for their use. Such a service made big demands on him personally for his pupils often fell far

short of the expectations of his clients. Besides having on his shoulders the management of a workshop he also had to look after the pupils in the dormitory and accompany them on frequent outings and picnics. After spending long days of hard work in his shop he also had to supervise the pupils late into the night until they were happily asleep. Now this was no easy task for the heat at night was often oppressive and the constant din from the noisy street below was anything but conducive to sleep. And as if this were not enough, he was also bandmaster, an occupation that later took first place in his activities when, eventually, the shoemaking department was phased out.

For Brother Fantini music was not only a passion; it was also a torment. He was an inveterate perfectionist who was rarely satisfied with the standard he achieved. He would begin with raw, often unpromising even if enthusiastic, young pupils and train them with a patience worthy of holy Job, only to see them leave school just when they had reached proficiency with their instrument. Many of his pupils finished up in the Police Band in Macau. And also in Hong Kong the conductor of the Police Band would get many of his recruits from Brother's band in the Aberdeen Technical School.

The care he took of the band instruments was proverbial. He kept them all in perfect working order, keeping them also polished almost as if they were new. And this he continued to do right up till 1984 although he was a ripe ninety-two years of age. And as if all this were not enough, at that advanced age he began repairing and refurbishing old and discarded instruments of the band in Salesian



Bro. Fantini's brass band (Macau 1932)

School in Macau. It was hard for him to relinquish the baton after having enlivened school life and entertainments and festivities for so many years. Often during those years the band had participated at funerals and civic celebrations, earning some badly needed income for the depleted coffers of the school.

When he was in Hong Kong he would often take his band to the homes of local benefactors and dignitaries to express in cheerful notes the gratitude the school wished to manifest to its friends. Some occasions gave him great satisfaction and pride: such were journeys to Nanking to perform at the Mausoleum of President Sun Yat Sen; to Shiuchow for the episcopal consecration of Msgr. Ignatius Canazei; and to Shanghai in 1934 for celebrations marking the canonization of Don Bosco.

His great love for and dedication to music was equalled by similar sentiments for gymnastics. In his early years in Macau Fr. Luigi Versiglia encouraged him to take up the teaching of physical education and to organize displays. His interest, ability and achievements in this field enhanced his reputation as well as that of the school, which also benefitted financially. Few, however, of those who admired him and his work were aware of the sacrifices in time and energy that such activities entailed.

In his last years in Shanghai he was awarded an honorary diploma in physical education.



Bro. Fantini's gymnasts in action (Macau, 1930)

HIS PERSONALITY

All who knew Brother admired his virtue while still regretting a strong inclination in him to pessimism, a tendency that remained with him for most of his life. This propensity can be traced to his childhood and the early bereavement of his parents, which necessitated his living with and working for his grandparents. The ten-year old boy had often to set out in the dead of the night, driving a wayward donkey that was pulling a cartload of vegetables; many obstacles had to be faced along the way to San Marino and the child's strength,

courage, patience and resolution was often put to the test.

Things did not improve when he lost his grandparents and he ended up in an institution. There he hoped to be able to study but instead had to be resigned to learning shoemaking and helping out in the staff dining room. What annoyed him most was having to do things for which he had no training. The only field in which he hoped to reap some satisfaction was shoemaking but a demanding clientele could often give rise to embarrassment and unpleasantness. Even the teaching of music and gymnastics did not always give him joy because of a deep feeling of a lack of serious and adequate preparation.

As a self-trained teacher he was highly successful but his proneness to pessimism deprived him of legitimate satisfaction since in his achievements he would infallibly single out and dwell on the inevitable flaws so often inherent in human actions. In 1968 our deceased emeritus Rector Major,



In recognition of 50 years in China (St. Louis, 1962)

Fr. Luigi Ricceri was in Hong Kong and during his stay complimented our worthy Brother and presented him with a commemorative medal. While all present applauded Brother Ottavio was heard muttering under his breath: "How I would love to be able to hide behind this medal!"

His pessimism led him to harbour an excessive anxiety, an obsession, about the salvation of his own soul. However, such an attitude was fortunately held in check by a deep, fervent spirit of faith. He had formed the habit of a well-regulated life; he was disciplined, trim, neat and tidy. And so daily Mass, Holy Communion, meditation, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, the recitation of the Rosary, the Way of the Cross all found their allotted time in his schedule even

if often he apparently found little satisfaction in them.

His spirit of obedience was remarkable. In his last years he reacted with childlike simplicity to the many acts of kindness shown to him by those around him even if at times such gestures were more of a hindrance than a help to him. His natural temperament, reflecting the Romagna stock from which he came, sometimes led him into outbursts of impatience, even with his Superiors. But only a very short time later he would show up to offer an apology and then unobtrusively make his way to the chapel to make the Way of the Cross in atonement for his lack of selfcontrol.

Towards the end of his very active life he found it hard to resign himself to what he called idleness. Inactivity was something he could not stand and sitting around "doing nothing" made him very uneasy. At times he would take up a broom and sweep the tree leaves that had fallen to the ground in the school playground, a frustrating task since the leaves would continue to fall. He insisted on planting fruit trees around the garden and watering them in spite of the fact that his strength was ebbing and his eyesight failing. He had to forego these hobbies, his card games and his game of bowls.

HIS LAST ILLNESS

In his final years bouts of bronchitis called for short spells of hospitalization but he would get well again and return to the community life he loved. On November 5th. he entered the hospital for the last time. Early in the morning of that day he had stumbled and fallen on his way to meditation, sustaining injuries to his left eye and to the left side of his body. He seemed to react favourably to the treatment received in Canossa Hospital although he was unable to swallow any food. His condition worsened, his pain increased and he began to lose consciousness; at times he would rally a little and answer the prayers being recited at his bedside. Many of his community came to visit him on his feastday, November 20th. He was able to receive Holy Communion and show his readiness to pray for vocations, a request made to him by Fr. Provincial who was present at his bedside.

On November 22nd. the fever intensified and his Rector hurried to his bedside and remained with him until midday. At about 2 p.m. he was hastily called back to hospital by the faithful nurse who was attending Brother Fantini. The Catechist responded to the call but when he reached the bedside of Ottavio he had already left to meet the Lord. Several Canossian Sisters and the nurse Sophia were with him when he breathed his last. Fr. Catechist administered to him the Sacrament of the Sick even if he had already received this sacrament in full consciousness on the day he was taken to hospital.

As soon as the news of his death reached his community the confreres left for the hospital, together with the novices and some aspirants, and after the recitation of prayers for the deceased arrangements were made to transfer the body to the city Funeral Home.

Brother Fantini's many friends and past-pupils grieved for his death. The

Rector Major and the Consul-General for Italy in Hong Kong were among the many who sent letters or expressions of condolence. The Consul-General, speaking on behalf of the Italian community in Hong Kong, declared that Brother had been "one of the pillars of the Salesian Society in the Far East."

Many past-pupils in Hong Kong and Macau owe so much to Brother Fantini and while he was in life they sought opportunities to express their gratitude. They were well represented at his funeral and made up a band that provided music in the Funeral Home. Brother would often say: "Don Bosco Promised us bread, work and heaven. He has always given me plenty of work but also plenty of bread. And now I am waiting for heaven."

We are sure that Don Bosco has kept his promise. Let us pray for the happy repose of his soul and ask God to help us imitate his virtues so that one day we also may join him and all the Salesians in heaven.

We hope and pray that the Lord will heed the prayers of Brother Ottavio and grant to our Province many vocations, particularly to the Brotherhood, so that we may soon see many youthful confreres in our communities living the Salesian spirit according to the heart of our holy Founder Don Bosco.

On behalf of Father Provincial and the Confreres of the Province,

January 25th. 1991

Fr. Mario Rassiga, sdb.

For the necrology

BROTHER OTTAVIO FANTINI

Born: 25. 1. 1892 Marradi (Florence)

Professed: 29. 9 1910, San Benigno, Italy

Died: 23. 11. 1990 in Hong Kong.

