



**OBITUARY LETTER  
OF  
BROTHER DOMINIC FRANCESIA**

HONG KONG 1992

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On July 19th. 1991 Brother Dominic Francesia terminated his long, exemplary religious life in St. Paul's Hospital, Hong Kong.

## HIS LIFE

He was born on April 26th. 1906 at Mezzenile (Turin, Italy) and baptized in the local church three days later. Our information on his childhood days is very meagre. We do know that he was confirmed on April 19th. 1919 at the Salesian Institute Richelmy in Turin (Martinetto) and it was here that he learned shoemaking, having among his teachers Bro. Ottavio Fantini, who had gone to China in 1912 and had just returned to Italy.

In 1924 Fr. Sante Garelli was on the lookout for personnel that he needed to staff a technical school in Shanghai. This new foundation owed its existence to the drive and generosity of a certain Mr. Joseph Lo Pa-Hong, a well-known Chinese philanthropist and recipient of Papal honours. Fr. Garelli's invitation to go to Shanghai was readily accepted by Bro. Fantini, and also by Dominic Francesia who was only too willing to emulate the example of his instructor. Fr. Garelli had also managed to enthuse a group of young men who were ready to go with him as Salesian aspirants to faraway Shanghai. Francesia was one of this party.

Since those leaving for China that year were quite numerous they were broken up into two groups: Bro. Fantini left with one group and Francesia with the other. He reached Shanghai on January 16th. 1925 and found there Bro. Fantini fully engulfed in setting up a shoemaking department, in temporary premises until the new school building had been completed.

Dominic lost no time in joining Bro. Fantini, throwing himself enthusiastically into the task of getting the new workshop on its feet. However, he was not to stay long in Shanghai for at the end of the year 1925 he and other aspirants left that city and came down to Macau where they joined a group of clerics freshly arrived from the missionary aspirantate at Ivrea and began their novitiate on February 1st. 1926. He took his first vows (triennial) on February 2nd. 1927.

After making his profession he remained in Macau until October, teaching in the shoemaking department of the Orphanage of the Immaculate Conception — presently known as Instituto Salesiano (Macau).

In September 1927 St. Louis School in Hong Kong came under the

management of the Salesians whose task it was to convert the small school into a trade school. To this school was sent Bro. Francesia to become assistant instructor in the incipient shoemaking workshop.

A much bigger trade school was launched in 1935, in Aberdeen, a fishing village five miles to the south of St. Louis School, and Brother Dominic and his shop left St. Louis to settle down at the newly-erected Aberdeen Trade School. And here he was placed in charge of his workshop.

In June 1940 practically all German and Italian Salesians in Hong Kong were assembled and confined to our House of Studies at Shaukiwan or St. Louis School, a step taken by the local government in view of the war in Europe. Brother Francesia, however, being well-known to the local authorities for his work with juvenile delinquents, was left free at the Aberdeen Trade School, together with his Rector, Fr. Vincent Bernardini. Only in December 1941 was he interned, when the Japanese army attacked Hong Kong. His internment lasted sixteen days; he was freed by the Japanese on December 26th. and was soon back in the school to resume work with his pupils. Half of the school building remained occupied by the Japanese soldiers for the duration of the war while the Salesians occupied the other half with about one hundred boarders and several workshops.

His years in Aberdeen were far from easy, not only because of the hardships that accompany war but also because the area was notorious for malaria. Staff and pupils succumbed several times to malarial fevers, and some pupils died as a result. Naturally, in all this Brother Dominic did not remain unscathed: he was often ill, and then the illness of others and the deaths of the pupils were keenly felt by him.

Brother remained in Aberdeen Trade School until 1950 when he was transferred once more to the trade school in Macau. He stayed here until being sent to take over the shoemaking department in Tang King Po School. This school had been opened in 1952 and at the same time the shoemaking section in Aberdeen moved to this new address. With the passing of time and for lack of pupils and appeal the cobbler's trade went out of fashion in scholastic establishments; but Brother Francesia remained on the staff as supervisor of the pupils and as sacristan in the school chapel.

The years were passing and Brother's life of sacrifice had left its mark on him. The superiors were worried about his failing health, his poor eyesight and his diabetic condition so on March 3rd. 1989 he went to live at a Home for the Elderly run by the Little Sisters of the Poor in a very scenic part of Hong Kong. The Little Sisters have three such homes here in Hong Kong and early in May 1991 Brother was moved to the Home quite close to our technical school in Aberdeen. On June 30th. however he had to be rushed to a government hospital from which, as soon as he was well enough to be transported, he was transferred to St. Paul's Hospital. It was here that on July 19th., notwithstanding the dedicated care and services of doctors and nurses and the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres, he left us for the reward that awaited him for his lifelong service to the poor, to the sick and imprisoned and to his young apprentices to shoemaking.

## THE RELIGIOUS

Brother Francesia was a deeply devout Salesian; his piety, like his whole life, was full of simplicity; in him there was nothing that struck you as extraordinary, beyond his unfailing, daily encounter with God. There was nothing in his demeanour that would make him stand out or impress — except for his remarkable simplicity. His piety, profound and genuine, blossomed naturally into an intense zeal for souls. One thing that gave him much pleasure was distributing medals and holy pictures, bearing pious maxims, to pupils and grown-ups, especially to his beloved past pupils. At times he would beckon to a boy and ask him to recite the ten commandments, or to make him some timely reminder or opportune remark. In such cases he was wont to keep his eyes closed; and on one occasion one little scamp to whom he was administering a kindly lecture quietly slipped away, leaving Brother to carry on his soliloquy. Once he became aware of the boyish prank he broke into a broad smile.

His former pupils were rightly attached to him for he never spared himself in looking after their welfare. To provide employment for them he accepted government contracts to make footwear for the police and prison departments. And when the school no longer accepted cobbler-apprentices he kept his workshop running with Past Pupils as long as he found it possible to procure work for them.

On meeting former pupils that he had not seen for a long time he always wanted to know how they stood spiritually. In this way he would often come to know that one or another of them had unwittingly contracted marriage without first seeking the necessary dispensation. In such cases he made sure they contacted their parish priest and in this way was instrumental in fixing up over fifty marriages.

On coming to know that a past pupil was in hospital he would lose no time and make him a visit. These visits offered him excellent opportunities to widen his apostolate and so, encouraged by hospital chaplains and nuns, he increased his hospital visits, no longer limiting them to his former pupils. He would console and counsel and catechize the sick, and also baptize them when the circumstances warranted such a step. It is reckoned that he must have prepared more than three thousand people, both young and old, for their final journey into eternity.

His care of past pupils led him, in due course, to visit those among them that had finished up in prison. His former pupils were to be found not only among the prisoners but also among the prison guards. To all of these but particularly to the former he always had a special word of consolation, exhorting them to turn over a new leaf, change their lives and prepare to live honest lives once they had regained their freedom.

Not being a cleric, he enjoyed greater access to all categories of prisoners and quite a few of those condemned to death benefited from his zeal and love for them, studied catechism and asked to be baptized. He would then refer them to the prison chaplain and experience the spiritual joy of seeing them become

children of God. During these years of his prison apostolate he had the great consolation of seeing all those executed become Christians before their death; that is, all except one who was a Moslem.

Brother Dominic accomplished this apostolate without in any way neglecting his daily duties in the community. He looked after his workshop conscientiously right up till the day it was closed down. He excelled in looking after and supervising the pupils. He was always on the lookout to foresee and forestall any conduct or actions that could have affected adversely his charges. Supervision of the pupils had well nigh become an obsession with him. And even during his last days in the Home for the Aged he would want to know if adequate provision was being made back in the school for the supervision of the boys.

One of his joys was being sacristan and he revelled in being in such close proximity to the Lord. He took scrupulous care of the altar and vestments; and his frequent, devout genuflections at the altar were a profession of faith and an example not wasted on those who observed him.

His spirit of obedience was extraordinary. He never failed to obey; and he always refrained from making remarks, even when it must have cost him to acquiesce; as, for example, when his superiors, seeing him tired and worn out, would invite him to give up this or that activity that they knew he deeply cherished.

His spirit of poverty was truly striking. He was humble, thrifty and mortified; he possessed nothing that could be considered superfluous. It can be truly said of him that he lived sparsely and died poor.

Humanly speaking he was not particularly talented but never did he suffer from an inferiority complex. Amazingly, he made the most of what he had and what he was in order to promote the glory of God and the welfare of souls. Whatever he did was done out of love for God and for his neighbour.

## **HIS DEATH**

Towards the end his physical and mental health had deteriorated to the point that, in the opinion of all, death came to free him from all his sufferings. And yet when his final moment came his departure was mourned with deep grief not only by the confreres but also by all who had known him, not least the past pupils for whom he had toiled for so many years. And so many of these turned up for his funeral, at which Fr Peter Ho, the vice-Provincial, presided since Fr. Provincial was unavoidably absent from Hong Kong at the time.

Among the letters of condolence that Fr. Provincial received on the occasion of the death of Brother Dominic two deserve special mention: one came from the Commissioner of Correctional Services who recalled Brother's visits to the prisons throughout a quarter of a century; the second letter was from the Chaplain of Prisons who had hastened to celebrate a Mass in the maximum security prison in suffrage of the soul of this humble and faithful colleague in the prison ministry.

The good Lord will have richly rewarded Brother Francesia who, in visiting

and consoling the poor, the sick and imprisoned was rendering this service to Jesus himself. However, the duty remains for us to pray for the happy repose of his soul and to imitate his example in practising charity and loving his neighbour.

Fraternally yours in Don Bosco

Fr. Mario Rassiga, SDB

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FOR THE NECROLOGY: Brother Dominic Francesia, born at Mezzenile (Turin) on 26.4.1906, died in Hong Kong on 19.7.1991 at the age of 85, 64 years of profession and 66 as a missionary.