



**OBITUARY LETTER
OF
FATHER FRANCIS XAVIER LIANG**

HONG KONG 1993

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Dear confreres,

Although I am announcing to you the death of a distinguished but little known confrere I dare to say that I bring you good tidings. And what better news could I share with you than the fact that our dear Father Francis Xavier Liang died a happy, peaceful and edifying death on July 25th.; but only after having lived unflinchingly faithful, serenely and to the full - for many, long, cruel years - a life of suffering and abandonment, far away from the community life he loved so much. He was one of a handful of Salesians who remained behind the bamboo curtain after Mao 'liberated' mainland China. He lived fifteen years in a prison, and ten years in a labour camp that was utterly remote from his home and where he was just a number, and nothing more. He was hardly ordained (1947) when his calvary began; only in 1988 was he re-issued citizenship papers - once more he was a person.

For the last five years of his life he celebrated Mass privately at home in Shanghai, and many fervent christians made sure that that Mass was not without an appreciative congregation. For the last eight months of his life he had to face his final battle - against cancer. For the last two months of his life he could no longer retain food nor drink and had to be fed intravenously. Weak and in suffering, he found it extremely difficult to speak; but there was always a smile on his lips, to show the hospital staff and the visitors that he appreciated their services and their visits. And it was with a smile on his lips that he looked on the Host that was shown to him minutes before his holy death. He died only a few months short of his 75th. birthday. God gave him to us; and God took him back from us while he was still adamantly faithful to his christian and priestly and salesian vocation.



Francis Xavier Liang was born in Shanghai on November 5th. 1918, to a fervent couple who brought up a big family in the fear and love of God. He was the ninth of a family of twelve children. When his mother died in 1947 and just one month after his ordination, present at the funeral were also a younger brother already a Salesian and a younger sister belonging to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. And it was these two, Fr. Vincent and Sr. Teresa, who stayed at his bedside in hospital for the last two months of his life.

Francis came to the Salesians when he was fifteen years of age; it was in April 1933 that he entered our House at Shaukiwan (Hong Kong) as an aspirant, and it was in the same House that he began his novitiate in December 1936. He made his first profession, with 9 companions, on December 8th. 1937 and then commenced, still in the same House, his studies in Philosophy, which he terminated in June 1940. He finished his final examinations in the forenoon and in the afternoon of the same day he joined a group of young Salesians who were rushed to Aberdeen Industrial School to replace practically the complete staff of nearly thirty Salesians, who were withdrawn from circulation due to Italy's entrance into the war. All during the summer months of that year he was kept busy doing his share of the work involved in looking after 380 boisterous boarders.

At the end of the summer he was assigned to Macau, to look after the aspirants, who had been recently transferred from Hong Kong. He is still fondly remembered by his pupils of those war years. In 1943 he began to study theology, while still caring for the aspirants. When the Pacific War ended in August 1945 Francis was able to leave South China and go back to his native Shanghai and see his family, which he had left many years previously to go to Hong Kong. He continued his studies for the priesthood in the studentate at Nantao (Shanghai) where he was ordained on January 30th. 1947.

The Chinese people had been experiencing war for many years; great suffering and great destruction had been their lot. But now the noose was beginning to tighten and the Church was nearing a persecution that was to bring out the best in the valiant members of the Chinese Church. Francis would soon be called on to play his part, and this he was to do superbly, silently, patiently, with unfailing and unflagging perseverance. He would soon be called on to prove how much he loved his country and, above all, his God.

In June 1947 he was assigned to Don Bosco Technical School at Yangtsepoo in Shanghai, and taught there until 1949 when he was appointed prefect of studies in the same school. The city fell to the Red Army in May of that year but he was able to continue his work in the school until 1951, in which year he became vice-superior in the same community and parish priest in the adjacent church of St. John Bosco. Life was gradually getting more and more

difficult, especially for christians, religious and priests. Dark clouds were gathering on the horizon; a long Good Friday was about to begin; heroic sacrifices were soon to be the order of the day. But Francis came from a family that was well-known for its granitic faith, exemplary christian life and numerous religious vocations. He had always distinguished himself as a zealous son of Don Bosco and an enthusiastic and dedicated educator of youth. His trust in God's goodness and his devotion to the Blessed Mother were to stand him in good stead.

On September 8th. 1955 he came under the scrutiny and control of the authorities. On that same night about 10.000 persons were picked up by the security forces and imprisoned, among them the Bishop of Shanghai Msgr. Ignatius Kung (later to become Cardinal), several priests and some of the faithful. Fr. Liang continued to carry out his duties, preaching also, in spite of the fact that whatever he said was being jotted down. He would remark: "What I am saying is nothing more nor less than the Gospel." During those days, on hearing a cadre manifest to him the desire to learn more about the Church, Francis cautiously remarked that the law clearly stated that only in church was such information to be offered. Some thought that this was a trap that Francis had deftly avoided. His turn was soon to come.

On September 26th. 1955 he was taken into custody and for seven long years was subjected to endless interrogations that had the scope of wearing him down both physically and psychically. It was only in 1962 that he was sentenced and sent to a forced labour camp in Beihu (White Lake) in the Province of Anhui. He was assigned to Gang number 13 which was made up of 300 prisoners; in all there were fourteen of these groups or gangs of workers. In his own group there were also four priests (3 Jesuits and a diocesan priest). His work consisted in carrying soil and looking after the plantation. He once fell into a deep canal during a flood, but was miraculously saved when he invoked the assistance of Our Lady Help of Christians. He came out of the water, safe and sound, and still carrying with him the few things he was transporting. His sufferings were many: undernourishment, bitter cold and, worst of all, the leeches that would cling to his legs in the fields and in the ponds, and would only detach themselves when they had had enough. Fr. Joseph Fu, another Salesian, had died heroically in this same camp, probably in the month of October 1961.

Although Fr. Liang completed his term of fifteen years' imprisonment on September 26th. 1970, he remained in the same camp until February 1980. From 1973 on he was allowed to visit his family in Shanghai yearly, and spend two weeks with his relatives. In 1978 he managed to get some wine and hosts and began celebrating Mass secretly very early in the morning, shielded by his mosquito net. Once, when he was asked by the occupant of the neighbouring bed what he was eating and drinking, he nonchalantly replied that he was

taking his medicine and a little wine as a tonic. Not a bad answer!

In 1980 Francis came back to live in Shanghai. The Public Security men of his district urged him to return to the forced labour camp whence he had come, while the head of the camp advised him not to return but stay in Shanghai. Fr. Liang's goodness had won the heart of this official. Only in 1988 was he able to have his situation normalized.

Little by little he permitted some of the faithful to attend his Mass, which he celebrated at home; thirty, forty, and at times even more people, crowded into the small room and spilled over on to the stairway. The communists were aware of this and asked him to tell the people to go to their own parish churches for the services (which were state-controlled). He would answer that they had come of their own free will and so he could not bring himself to send them away. One of these christians tells us that Fr. Liang's zeal in attempting to strengthen the faith of his little flock led him to give somewhat lengthy homilies that could last as long as 30-45 minutes.

Although his superiors had not delegated him, the confreres in his area, seeing him so prudent and wise, considered him their superior and spiritual director; the christians still deeply attached to the Holy Father held him in high esteem and sought him out as their spiritual guide.

He would rise at 4.30 in the morning to make his meditation and say his breviary. At 6 a.m. he would listen to the Radio Veritas broadcast; and at 7.30 a.m. he would celebrate Mass. Throughout the day he was at the service of the faithful.

He was seventy-four in 1992. Physically, he was not robust, yet he enjoyed good health. However, on December 14th. 1992 he did not feel well, and the diagnosis reached by the doctors in Zhing-an Hospital in Shanghai on December 30th. 1992 was that he had a malignant tumour in the stomach. Fr. Provincial immediately began the lengthy process to have him brought down to Hong Kong for medical care. He arrived on March 10th. 1993 and two days later was admitted to St. Paul's Hospital where the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres and their competent medical staff have been looking after ailing Salesians since at least 1927. The doctors soon verified that there was a tumour in the stomach that was spreading to the pancreas, kidneys and bladder. They judged it inadvisable to operate on such a sensitive area. Every effort was made to improve his situation and protect adjacent organs from damage. Some christians in Shanghai offered their lives for the recovery of this good priest, imitating those youths at Valdocco who had generously offered up their lives for the recovery of Don Bosco. And shortly after his death a touching letter arrived

from China, in which a group of young people he had been taking care of, poured forth their gratitude and sorrow, in prose and poetry.

Only a few hours after his arrival in Hong Kong, on March 10th., he was able to meet, at the airport, His Eminence Cardinal Castillo, who was in transit from Tokyo, on his way back to Rome. It was a thrilling and moving moment for both of them. On April 5th. Fr. Liang received a letter from Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State, on behalf of the Holy Father (thanks to the prompt information given to the Pope by Cardinal Castillo), expressing the Holy Father's admiration and joy at being able to send him his Apostolic Blessing.

The Rector Major, Fr. Egidio Viganò, came from Vietnam on March 22nd. and an hour after his arrival in Hong Kong had a long conversation with Fr. Liang, at the Provincial House. On March 24th. the Rector Major concelebrated the Eucharist at the House of Formation and during his homily was loud in his praise and admiration for the "confessors of the faith" who were concelebrating with him: Fr. Francis Wang (28 years in prison), Fr. Francis Liang (25 years) and Fr. Paul Fong (37 years). On March 27th. the Rector Major wrote to Fr. Liang from Rome and thanked him for his loyalty to the Church, and for the good example he offered us all.

It is far from easy for us to imagine what a confrere must feel like on rejoining a Salesian community, after being forcibly kept far from it for well-nigh 40 years. How happy and grateful to God he was, and to the Congregation, for such an unhoped for grace. However, true to his apostolic character, he strongly desired and hoped that he could eventually return to his confreres and christians in his native Shanghai. As a matter of fact, his return to Shanghai had been fixed for the end of the month of June, shortly after he would have assisted at the ordination of two young Salesians in Hong Kong. But the Lord disposed otherwise.



On June 6th. he was no longer able to retain any food and had to be re-admitted to St. Paul's Hospital. The tumour had spread; he could only take liquids. His rector, Fr. Norbert Tse, administered to him the Sacrament of the Sick. He began to fail and his voice became less audible; but his mind remained remarkably clear. Never did he utter a word of complaint. He prayed and meditated in silence, always serene and ready to accept whatever God judged was best for him. At the foot of his bed had been placed a big picture of Our Lady on which his gaze often rested, with a winning smile constantly on his lips.

Right from the beginning of his final stay in hospital he was unable to celebrate Mass, but he was able to receive Holy Communion. Holding the Sacred Host between his fingers, he would pause at length in prayerful silence before devoutly consuming it. During his last days he was unable to receive, but unfailingly made his spiritual communion.

For the last month of his life on earth he had the consolation of being accompanied by his Salesian sister Teresa and his Salesian brother Fr. Vincent, both of whom had come from Taiwan to be close to him. Efforts made to have permission for some of his family to come down from Shanghai, to be with him for a last time, proved fruitless. In hospital he was attended with loving care by the Sisters and doctors and nurses. The frequent visits of the confreres, cooperators and past-pupils were a source of consolation to him.

On June 28th. he experienced the joy of receiving a sign of special affection of the Holy Father, with the arrival of a fax from His Grace Msgr. John Re, Substitute of the Secretary of State. Having been briefed by Cardinal Castillo of the state of health of Fr. Liang and of his years of suffering, the Holy Father thanked him for the acceptable sacrifice he had made for the Church and for the Pope, recommended him to the motherly protection of the Virgin Mary, and once more imparted his Apostolic Blessing. At all this he remained deeply moved and consoled.

A great surprise was in store for him! On the evening of July 10th., only a few hours after his arrival in Hong Kong, His Eminence Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue, visited our community for sick and elderly confreres, and on hearing that Fr. Liang was in hospital he insisted on calling on him and giving him his blessing.

On Saturday afternoon of July 24th. some confreres working in Taiwan, who had just finished their annual retreat in Hong Kong, called at the hospital to pay him a last visit and present to him the prayers and good wishes of our communities in Taiwan.

On Sunday July 25th. at 7.30 a.m. the Sister in charge of the hospital brought him Holy Communion and held up the Host for his veneration; he smiled and bowed his head in reverence; he was serene and fully conscious. Minutes later Jesus came and took him with Him, silently and painlessly.

On that Sunday morning it was being proclaimed in the Gospel of the day that "the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone had found; he hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it." (Mt. 13:44-46).

Fr. Francis Liang! Behold a christian, a Salesian, a priest who found the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price. He had lived and worked and suffered always completely loyal to Christ and to his Vicar on earth; his faith was his greatest possession and his greatest strength. He loved his vocation and remained faithful to it until the end. For all these good things he was ready to live, to suffer and to die.

A confessor of the faith has gone to his reward! The Church and the Congregation have acquired another jewel in their crown. "Franceschino", as we affectionately called him when he was on earth, fought the good fight, and preserved the faith. Such is the conviction of many who knew him. His confreres thank him for the witness he gave, for the life he led, for the fight he waged and for the victory God gave him. Yes, we shall all pray for him; but we shall also ask him to obtain for us and for the Church in China the hidden treasure and priceless pearl that he so admirably portrayed in his hidden life.

May the good Lord hear our prayers and continue to bless us with vocations similar to those of our heroic confreres. This is also our fervent prayer to our beloved Mother, Mary Help of Christians.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John Baptist ZEN, SDB
Provincial

August 15, 1993

DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY:

FR. FRANCIS XAVIER LIANG -- born in Shanghai (China) on
November 5th. 1918. Died in Hong Kong on July 25th. 1993
at the age of 74, after 56 years of profession and 47 of priesthood.

