

Salesian Protomartyrs: Aloysius (Louis) Versiglia and Callistus Caravario

written by Redaktor strongy | February 23, 2024

Louis and Callistus: the same missionary vocation for the salvation of souls, but a different story.

25 February this year marks the 94th anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop Aloysius (Louis) Versiglia and Fr Callistus Caravario, missionaries to China.

Louis Versiglia and Callistus Caravario: two figures different in many respects but united by a great apostolic zeal and their last act of pure love in defence of the Catholic religion and the purity of three Chinese girls.

Louis: the aspiring vet who became a Salesian missionary

Aloysius Versiglia, born on 5 June 1873 in Oliva Gessi (PV). As a child, although a regular altar boy at the parish church of his village, he had no intention of becoming a priest. In fact, he was annoyed when his fellow villagers, seeing him so devout in church, prophesied his future as a priest. This was not part of his life plan at all, not even when at the age of 12 he was sent to study in Valdocco in Turin. He loves horses and dreamt of becoming a veterinarian. Studying in Turin reinforced in him the hope of later enrolling in the prestigious Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at Turin University.

At Valdocco, however, he met Don Bosco, by then old and ill, and was charmed by his charism.



Versiglia with Fr Braga and the students of the St Joseph Institute in Ho Sai

During these years at Valdocco, something began to take shape in Versiglia's soul. The charity and devotion radiated by the Salesian environment, together with the fascination of Don Bosco, slowly worked their way into Louis' soul, until a decisive event, and from that day on he would no longer have any doubts. On 11 March 1888, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, while attending the farewell ceremony for a group of missionaries leaving for Argentina, he was impressed by the modest and recollected demeanour of one of the six young men leaving. Hence his vocation. From that day, the strong desire to become a priest, a Salesian missionary priest, was born in him. (The story of his missionary vocation is well described in the letter he wrote to his Rector Fr Barberis in 1890).

Louis therefore made his novitiate in Foglizzo (1888-1890), where he was irreproachable in everything: charitable with his companions, very pious and at the same time enterprising and full of life. He then won a scholarship for a course in philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome and received a bachelor's degree in philosophy at the age of twenty.

He was ordained a priest when he was only twenty-two years old with a dispensation granted by the Holy See given his psychological and moral maturity, superior to his age.

He was immediately sent to teach philosophy to the novices at Foglizzo, where, with his outspoken and always cheerful character, he was respected and admired by everyone for his competence, friendliness and impartiality. He demanded observance of the rules, leading everyone by example.

After Foglizzo, he was entrusted with the direction of the new novitiate in Genzano outside Rome, where he also transmitted the missionary ideal to his clerics.

Callistus: a pure young man eager to be a missionary



Cleric Caravario in Shanghai with Fr Garelli and 20 baptising students

Callistus Caravario's vocation, on the other hand, has a completely different story. He was born on 8 June 1903, exactly thirty years after Louis Versiglia, in Courgnè (TO), and moved to Turin with his family at the age of five. He was good-natured, very attached to his mother, who showed him special attention, and from an early age showed a marked vocation for the priesthood. His first amusements were imitating the gestures of the priest celebrating Mass. He soon learnt to serve Mass, did so with devotion, and attended the St Joseph's oratory in Turin with passion and commitment. It became his second home.

In primary classes in St John the Evangelist college, for two years he had cleric Charles Braga, now Servant of God, as his teacher.

He constantly told his mother that he would become a priest when he grew up.

In 1914 he began secondary classes at the Valdocco Oratory, where he was particularly attracted by the missionaries who visited the Superiors there and with whom he often spent time in recreation, feeding his desire for the Missions.

In 1918 he began his novitiate in Foglizzo and took his religious vows the following year. He attended the Saint Aloysius Oratory in Via Ormea where he introduced more than one young man to the priesthood.

In 1922 he met Bishop Versiglia, who had arrived in Turin from China to attend the General Chapter, and expressed his strong desire to follow him in the Mission. The Superiors, however, did not allow him to realise his dream immediately, because this would oblige him to cut short his studies, but Callistus assured Versiglia: "Bishop, you will see that I will be true to my word: I will follow you to China. You will see that I will certainly follow you."

The following year, through a group of missionaries leaving for China, he sent a letter to Fr Braga, missionary in Shiu-chow, asking him to "prepare a little place for him."

Louis and Callistus: different missionary experiences but united by their complete dedication to their neighbour and by winning the affection and attachment of young people

Fr Versiglia kept his missionary ideal alive over the years and the opportunity to go on mission presented itself to him in 1906, when the Rector Major of the Salesians, following negotiations with the bishop of Macao, appointed him head of an expedition to Macao, a Portuguese colony on the southern coast of China, to run and manage an orphanage.

The expedition consisted of two other priests and three brothers: a tailor, a shoemaker and a printer. The missionaries arrived in Macao on 13 February 1906.

Fr Versiglia adopted Don Bosco's educational method, trying to create a family environment based on loving-kindness. For the orphans their "Luì San-fù" (Father Louis) had total and loving dedication which was fully reciprocated by them. As soon as he arrived they ran to him and greet him warmly. This is why Fr Versiglia became known in Macao as the "father of the orphans".

In the orphanage run by Versiglia, games and music were fundamental educational tools. This inspired him to open a festive oratory and establish a band

with brass instruments and drums, which immediately captured the curiosity and sympathy of all the Chinese, in whose eyes the little musicians seem to be “a fantastic group from another world.”

Over the years, Fr Versiglia transformed the orphanage into a professional Arts and Crafts school for orphaned pupils that was so highly regarded that it was adopted as a model for other schools in Macao. The children who graduated from there immediately found employment in the city’s administrative offices or managed to open their own handicraft shops. This school made a valuable contribution to social and cultural promotion and its importance was recognised by all.

In 1911, the Bishop of Macao entrusted Versiglia with the evangelisation of the Heung Shan district, a region in the vast delta of the Pearl River.

In this territory, the task of evangelisation was particularly difficult. “There is everything to do, preparing catechists, teachers, schools...” wrote Fr Versiglia. A difficult task above all because of the lack of personnel, both male and female, and the great distrust of the Chinese people towards missionaries, considered as foreigners sent by colonialist countries and therefore enemies.

A few months later, the thousand-year Chinese monarchy was overthrown and the Republic was established in October 1911, but clashes between imperial and revolutionary troops continued. Piracy flourished again and epidemics broke out. The bubonic plague even spread and Fr Versiglia spared no sacrifices to help anyone in need, visiting the poor, comforting the sick and administering baptisms. Once a month he also visits lepers relegated to a nearby island.

In Versiglia’s firm desire to help everyone, even the most wretched, estranged and forgotten, to assist them both materially in the daily needs of life, and spiritually by saving their souls, we cannot but see in him a boundless love for his neighbour.

In 1918, the first completely autonomous Salesian Mission in China came into being, the Shiu-Chow Mission, which encompassed a vast mountainous region, where one could only move around by boat, on foot or on horseback, and the inhabitants were scattered in villages far away from each other.

In 1921, he was consecrated bishop.

The various confreres all gave testimony to Versiglia’s great charity, which led him to be almost the servant of his missionaries, and when they were sick he assisted them day and night. Charity even in small things. Fr Garelli, for example,

would recount that when he arrived from Italy at the residence in Shiu-chow, which was small, poor and unfurnished, Versiglia told him, "You see, there is only one bed here. I am now broken in to missionary life, but you are not! You are still used to the comforts of civilised life. So, you sleep on that bed and I will sleep here on the floor."

Even as a bishop, he continued to sacrifice himself for his confreres and for the Chinese, and offered himself for any service: printer, sacristan, gardener, painter, even barber.

He undertook very tiring and very long pastoral visits, some lasting up to two months, in very uncomfortable conditions, he slept on the decks of public boats in the midst of people trampling over him, in dilapidated hotels, in the midst of a deluge...

He built schools, residences, churches, dispensaries, an orphanage, an old people's home, all thanks to his special skills: 1) he had skills as an architect; in fact, he designed and planned all the buildings himself and then directed the work, 2) he had great oratorical skills that enable him to raise the necessary funds. On his only two trips to Italy in 1916 and 1922 and on his trip to the Eucharistic Congress in Chicago, where he went for specific health reasons, he gave several seminars in which he charmed people, opening the hearts of many benefactors.

The years in Shiu-chow were even more difficult years. The republican government, in order to drive out powerful generals who still controlled vast areas of the north, asked for help from Russia, which sent its armaments, but also began to engage in Bolshevik propaganda against Western imperialism, and the missionaries were seen as enemies who must be driven out, their residences often occupied by the military, etc. Over the years, the scene became increasingly difficult, it became more and more dangerous to travel, piracy raged, some missionaries were kidnapped by pirates.

Bishop Versiglia did his utmost to defend the residences and people in danger and said, "if a victim is needed for the Vicariate, I beg the Lord to take me."

Callistus: young missionary passionate about Christ to the point of total self-giving

Callistus' missionary experience was different and shorter, but equally conducted with the greatest dedication of self.

He succeeded in realising his missionary dream at the age of twenty-one (1924), when he obtained permission to follow Fr Garelli to Shanghai, where the

Salesians were entrusted with the direction of a large vocational school.

At the handing over of the missionary cross in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, cleric Caravario formulated this prayer: "Lord, I do not wish my cross to be either light or heavy, but as You wish. Give it to me as You wish. I only ask that I may bear it willingly." Words that tell us so much about his willingness to accept God's will even in suffering and hardship.

Caravario therefore arrived in Shanghai in November 1924, and here, in addition to studying Chinese, he was entrusted with a huge amount of work: the complete care, twenty-four hours a day, of one hundred orphans, catechism, preparation for baptism and confirmation, animation of recreations. Pursuing his ideal of becoming a priest, he also began to study theology with great seriousness.

In 1927, he had to leave Shanghai due to the outbreak of the revolution and was sent to the distant island of Timor, a Portuguese colony in the Indonesian archipelago, ecclesiastically dependent on the Bishop of Macao, to open an arts and crafts school. He would stay in Timor for two years, which he would take advantage of to enrich his religious culture and his relationship with God in view of the Priesthood. In Timor, as in Shanghai, his apostolate bore the fruit of various vocations, and he earned the trust and affection of the young people "who all mourned his departure" when the Salesian house in Dili was closed in 1929.

He was therefore sent to the Shiu-chow Mission where he met his primary school teacher, Fr Charles Braga, and Bishop Versiglia, who ordained him a priest on 18 May 1929. That day, he wrote to his mother: "Mother, I am writing to you with a heart full of joy. This morning I was ordained, I am a priest for ever. By now your Callistus is no longer yours: he must be completely the Lord's. Will the time of my priesthood be long or short? I do not know. The important thing is that by presenting myself to the Lord I can say that I have made the grace He has given me bear fruit."

Caravario was extremely thin and weak due to malaria contracted in Timor, and Versiglia entrusted him with the Lin-chow Mission, thinking that the good climate of that area would benefit his physical health.

Like Versiglia, Caravario faced the hardships of apostolic journeys with a spirit of sacrifice and adaptation. "In this land there are many souls to be saved and workers are few; therefore, we must, with the Lord's help, save them even at the cost of any sacrifice."

Thanks to his qualities of purity, piety, gentleness and sacrifice, he was considered by his confreres to be the perfect model of a missionary priest.

Louis and Callistus: together in the ultimate sacrifice

On 24 February 1930 Bishop Versiglia left for a pastoral visit to the Lin-chow residence together with Fr Callistus Caravario, two teachers and three young girls who had studied at the Shiu-chow boarding school. On 25 February, on their way up the Lin-chow river, their boat was stopped by a dozen Bolshevik pirates who demand five hundred dollars as a pass (which the missionaries obviously did not have with them) and attempted to kidnap the girls, but Versiglia and Caravario firmly oppose this in order to protect the purity of the girls. Bishop Versiglia was determined to do his duty to the point of giving his life: "If it is necessary to die to save those entrusted to my care, I am ready." The pirates pounced on them, insulting the Catholic religion, and beat them brutally. Then they led them into a thicket, shot them and mistreated their bodies.

The girls, freed a few days later by the regular army, would testify to the serenity with which the two missionaries went to their deaths.

Louis and Callistus sacrificed themselves to defend the faith and purity of the three young girls.

Those who knew them testify that their strength of will and attachment to God permeated their entire lives in a heroic manner, and that their zeal for the salvation of souls was special.

The holiness of these beautiful souls was their daily conquest and their martyrdom was their crowning achievement.

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