

Dear Confreres, here we are in Rome on this 25th February. This was a tragic day 84 years ago in our great *patria sinensis* (let us call it this way to escape the powerful digital search engines of our Government). Today it is a glorious day for the whole Salesian Family, the day of the death of the Salesian Protomartyrs St. Luigi Versiglia, bishop, and St. Callisto Caravario, priest.

As in the great India, we Salesians have been present in our *patria sinensis* for the last 108 years, since 1906, when Blessed Michael Rua sent the first Salesians (3 priests and 3 brothers) to Macau. Their leader was the 33 years old Fr. Luigi Versiglia, who in the previous 10 years had been Rector and Master of Novices in Genzano di Roma. The Salesians, however, had been preceded in the *patria sinensi* by Mary Help of Christians herself. On 24 May, 1868 (two weeks before the consecration of the church of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco) a little chapel on the rocky hill of Zosé (Sheshan) near Shanghai was dedicated to her under the title of Help of Christians

The Salesians had also been preceded in the *patria sinensi*, first by the thoughts and then by the dreams of Don Bosco. He, in the first three months of 1874, in his letters mentions at least 5 times Hong Kong and the missions in *patria sinensi*. On 5 January, writing to Don Rua, he says: “Today at 10:00 a.m., together with Fr. Berto, I was received in audience by the Holy Father who kept us in joyful conversation about the Society of St. Francis de Sales, its members, the priests, the scholastics, the students, the artisans, Hong Kong, and many other things”. On 11 January, writing again to Don Rua, he says: “Tell Fr. Savio [Angelo] that he must prepare to be a saint so that he may go and sanctify those in Hong Kong”. On 12 March, in a petition to Pope Pius IX, he says: “Most Blessed Father, the priest John Bosco, Superior of the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales, prostrated at the feet of Your Beatitude, humbly reports that he has almost concluded the agreements to open 1. A house for the poor Catholic children of the school in Hong-Congh [*sic*] nella [...]”. Finally, on 18 March, writing to the Commission of Cardinals entrusted with the task of approving the Salesian Constitutions, Don Bosco expresses (I quote) “Some thoughts that inspire the priest John Bosco to humbly petition for the definitive approval of the Constitutions of the Salesian Society”. In all, Don Bosco expresses 9 points. The 5th is this: “The number of members is 330, the number of children entrusted to their care is 7,000. Agreements are practically already concluded, to open houses in America, in Africa, and in [...]. This demands that we have a Rule that excludes the uncertainty that would plague the members if they knew that the Rule could be easily changed”. Given such thoughts of his, it is no wonder Don Bosco repeatedly sees the *patria sinensis* also in his missionary dreams. Don Bosco himself gives us a summary of what he saw in the last-but-two page of the little note-book of his Spiritual Testament: “In due course our mission field will extend to [...] – to Peking, to be exact. But let us never forget that we exist for poor and abandoned boys. Amongst those who know little or nothing of the true God you will see taking place wonders formerly thought incredible but which almighty God will make manifest to the world.”

This is a paschal prophecy, promising wonders that are fruit of sweat and blood. Fr. Versiglia used to speak of a double chalice seen by Don Bosco in his dreams about *patria sinensis*: a chalice full of sweat and a chalice full of blood. In the 100 odd years of Salesian history in Sinis, 10 other Salesians have watered the vineyard of the Lord with their blood: 5 local confreres have died in prison for the faith (I mention only 3 of them: Fr. Aloysius Ye Shun Tian, Sc. Peter Ye Ming Ren, and Br. Jerome Yip Kat Kwong); 5 missionary confreres lost their lives in the very risky exercise of their pastoral service. Together with the blood of the much more numerous Spanish and Polish Salesian martyrs, the blood of these 12 our confreres in Sinis is producing fruit of new vocations, not only in loco, but also in other parts of the world: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

Since 1949, our *patria sinensis* is divided into “not-so-free *patria sinensis*”, “free *patria sinensis*”, and “diaspora *sinensis*”.

The “free patria” means Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Unfortunately, this “free patria” makes up only 2% of the whole. As for the diaspora sinensis, it is 100 million strong (25 million in Africa alone). Since the early 50’s, with a perseverant act of hope, our Provincial Directory continues to include a double section entitled “Temporarily closed Diocese” (the Diocese of Shiuchow) and “Temporarily Closed Houses and Schools”, giving a list of 9. The last one was closed 60 years ago, in 1954, in the capital of our patria sinensis, with the arrest and imprisonment on 3 March, 1954, of the first Salesian Rector sinensis, Fr. Paolo Fong Ting Chung.

Fr. Paul Fong paid his fidelity to Jesus and to Don Bosco with 37 years in prison and labour camp. Thanks be to God, 94 years old Fr. Paolo Fong is still alive. His exemplary life in our Salesian Missionary House in Shau Kei Wan, Hong Kong, is for us all a great sign of hope and trust in God. The good God used the closure of all our works in not-so-free patria sinensi and the consequent missionary diaspora to spread the Gospel and the charism of Don Bosco in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippine Islands. Of these diaspora missionaries, two are new Servants of God: Servant of God Fr. Andrej Majcen, the little Don Bosco of Salesian Vietnam, and Servant of God Fr. Carlo Braga, “the man who had three motherlands”, the little Don Bosco of the patria Sinensis et Filipina, who, for 22 years (the most difficult ones!), was Provincial in patria sinensi and for 6 years first Superior of Salesian Philippines.

In 1987 the prophetic journey of Rector Major Fr. Egidio Viganò became the basis of continuing educative pastoral work in the “not-so-free patria sinensis”. Paradoxically, it is our brothers and sisters suffering from Hansen’s disease (taken care of by Fr. Gaetano Nicosia and his coworkers) that opened the door to us again. Our Province began, then, to request again from the Rector Major the sending of new missionaries. Since then, about 30 young missionaries have arrived.

On his part, the Rector Major Fr. Juan Vecchi, already gravely sick in the infirmary of the UPS, in 2001 admonished us, somewhat mysteriously, saying: “You of the ‘free patria sinensis’ be careful not to sell out for a pottage of lentils the birthright the Salesian Society has to the not-so-free patria sinensis!”

Finally, our beloved Rector Major Fr. Pascual Chávez, putting his hand to the plough without looking back, in 2005, during the historic Team Visit of Hua Hin in Thailand, launched his educative pastoral project in favour of the poor and abandoned children of our not-so-free patria sinensis. The arrival of new missionaries was intensified and began bearing fruit. Now we have almost 30 young confreres in initial formation, something that we could not see in our Province for the last 30 years. These 30 young men are more or less equally distributed between confreres of free patria sinensis, confreres of not-so-free patria sinensis, and young missionary confreres ad Sinas. In addition to the 40-year old services to Hansenian brothers and sisters, now small light educative pastoral presences have sprung up in the not-so-free patria and, thanks be to God, are in blossom.

We are deeply grateful to God, to the Church, and to the Congregation, who have made possible this rebirth. Very special thanks go to the Provinces who have sent missionaries. A particular “thank you!” to Vietnam who has sent already 10 (the last one is the 100th Salesian Vietnamese missionary in the world!)

I end by asking all Provinces to take to heart the *missio patriae sinensis*, irrigated by the blood of our Protomartyrs St. Luigi Versiglia and St. Callisto Caravario whose feast we are celebrating today. May all Provinces, in prayer and animation, inspire their young confreres to offer themselves not only for the not-so-free patria sinensis, but also for the free patria sinensis, as well as for the diaspora sinensis in the whole world. As a matter of fact, in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and all the nations of the diaspora, notwithstanding the growing local vocations (that we hope are of the calibre of Fr. Aloysius Ye, Sc. Peter Ye, and Br. Jerome Yip), we still have extreme need of missionary personnel, hopefully of the calibre of Versiglia, Caravario, Majcen, and Braga! Thank you! And good night!