

Father Mario Rosso, 1924-2017

Fr. Mario was born in a little town of Crova, Italy. It's not far from Vercelli and not that far from Turin. It's in the rice-growing region of Piedmont, supplied by the mountain waters of the Sasia and Po rivers.

The hamlet of Crova has 421 inhabitants and one restaurant, called La Scaletta. I doubt if Fr. Mario was ever in it. I know for sure, if he were there, he didn't pay the bill. You see, Fr. Mario didn't ever pay for anything. Prescription glasses, dentures, acupuncture, clothes, postage, whatever, there was always a benefactor that paid. We pay for things by credit or debit card or apple-pay, almost a cashless society in which we live. Fr. Mario lived for most of his life with no money in his pocket, cashless living before plastic cards and microchips. We carry smart phones and receive text messages, use Twitter and Facebook to communicate, while Fr. Mario communicated the old-fashion way: with an engaging smile, endearing words...and with his rosary beads. He never used a computer, never turned on a television or called for Uber or Lyft.

Fr. Mario was an only child of Luigi and Caterina Rosso. He says that his mother died at the age of 23 years and died "due to my birth." However, she died October 9, 1924, more than eight months after his birth. His father remarried and he considered Angela his "second mother."

After attending the missionary aspirantate of Irvea, he travelled to Shanghai as a 14 year-old aspirant. Fr. Lanfranco Fredrigotti writes from Hong Kong at the death of Fr. Mario: "Born on 26 February, 1924, he arrived in China on October 15, 1938, a 14 year-old aspirant! It may be the first in the history of Catholic missions. His father was staunchly opposed to his departure for the missions, until the CIN Provincial, Servant of God Don Carlo Braga, visited his family. After one hour, Mario's father said, 'If you go together with this priest, then I will let you go.' After his arrival in China, he made his novitiate, but then had to wait for him to reach the canonical age of 16, before being able to make his first profession on February 28, 1940."

His life was blessed by ceaseless apostolic work in China for 40 years, in Canada for 16 years, and Saints Peter and Paul for 22 years. He lived the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount: poor in spirit and fact, mourned his own little sins and the

sins of countless penitents in hours in the confessional; his apostolate of mercy and understanding to the many he directed; his meekness that wasn't ever wimpy, but always gentle with an inner strength; who hungered and thirsted for justice for the poor and homeless; certainly clean of heart, because he had a direction and drive to serve God and the young...and the Chinese who called for his help, his blessing, and his comforting word. He did his best to be at peace with all; and who always bore any type of persecution whether from the communists in China or superiors (not, of course the present superiors).

The first reading of Isaiah is used during Advent and memorials for missionary saints. Now, we are all called to be saints and missionaries since Vatican II; but Isaiah's words are most appropriate for Fr. Mario, who at the age of 14, journeyed to China to become a Salesian of Don Bosco. Truly, the spirit of the Lord was upon him and anointed him to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to fight for liberty. He was a prophet who brought comfort to the uncomfortable and made uncomfortable those who lived in comfort.

The provincial of China, Fr. Lanfranco Fedrigotti, writes of Fr. Mario: "Fr. Mario Rosso is...remembered in China as a missionary who had put all his heart into learning well the language, both spoken and written. To the end of his life he wrote Chinese in a beautiful calligraphy, very much appreciated by the Chinese confreres and faithful. Fr. Mario loved China, loved Don Bosco, and loved Jesus with all his heart. For us all he remains a wonderful example of total dedication to God's call. Thank you, Fr. Mario!"

The second reading from Philippians serves as Fr. Mario's farewell address to those he served for 77 years: the Catholic Chinese of China, Canada, and the Chinese of the Bay Area. Fr. Mario speaks especially to you, thanking God as he remembers your friendship, your faith, the joy of your liturgies and the fun and fellowship of your holiday celebrations. He thanks you, as Paul thanked the Philippians and prays that your partnership in the gospel and the good work begun in you will continue until the day of Christ Jesus. Fr. Mario holds you in his heart for he sees you as "partners of grace," he longs for you "with the affection of Christ Jesus." His prayer, like St. Paul, is "that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you

may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Now, of course, Fr. Mario would have said it differently, but these are his sentiments to you, the Chinese community, and also to his fellow Salesians, to the many penitents who came to him for confession, the people he visited in their homes bringing the Eucharist, the people he met on his walks in North Beach, the Marina, and Cow Hollow, to all those he touched with his kindness, his encouraging words, his funny faces, and his surprising facility to speak not only Cantonese, but to speak the language of the heart.

Fr. Fredrigotti comments on his facility in Chinese: "Fr. Mario Rosso is also remembered in China as a missionary who had put all his heart in learning well the language, both spoken and written. To the end of his life he wrote Chinese in a beautiful calligraphy, very much appreciated by the Chinese confreres and faithful."

Despite the laudatory words of the Provincial of China, Fr. Lanfranco Fredrigotti, SDB, and despite serving as Master of Novices from 1956-1964 and 1973-1975, Director in Hong Kong and Macau, and Principal, Fr. Mario, because of the abundance of Chinese Salesians, was sent in 1981 to serve the Chinese Apostolate at Saints Peter and Paul Church in San Francisco.

Fr. Rosso remained at Saints Peter and Paul for ten years before his Chinese Apostolate in Canada in Edmonton and Calgary, Alberta and Surrey, British Columbia. He travelled to isolated Chinese communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan, before returning to Saints Peter and Paul in 2005.

For a time, Fr. Rosso worked in various parishes with the Chinese community in San Francisco, especially St. Anne's and St. Monica's. In 2009 until his death in December 15, 2017, Fr. Mario devoted all his time to Saints Peter and Paul, especially the Chinese Community.

He was confessor to many. Every Saturday, until his death he heard confessions with long lines that ended at times during the vigil Mass. He took great care with each penitent and gave appropriate and thoughtful counsel. He was available for

confessions everyday at any hour for all those who sought him out, priests, confrere, staff, any who rang the rectory doorbell.

Fr. Mario walked the streets of San Francisco, rosary in hand, blessing buildings and people as he walked in North Beach, along the Embarcadero, Marina, and Cow Hallow. People knew him by sight, if not by name. His last two years he was wheelchair bound, but before these last waning years, he was always on the move, walking and saying the rosary, time that he called his “television time.”

I don't think he ever watched TV, at least not at Saints Peter and Paul nor did he listen much to the radio. He did read the paper, the San Francisco Chronicle, especially for some reason, the “Datebook” section. Everyday, usually at the end of the day, sections of the Chronicle would find their way to his room to be read and unfortunately to be collected.

Rarely did Fr. Mario Rosso write to the Provincial. One time he wrote about the need for Chinese speaking priests in various cities of Canada. Another time he wrote concerning the Saints Peter and Paul Bulletin. He objected to his designation as “Salesian in Residence” that conveyed to him the idea that he was being shelved and charitably housed in the community. He was right. From then on, the Bulletin read, “Fr. Mario Rosso, SDB, Chinese Apostolate.” On another occasion he objected to being called “retired.” He opined that Don Bosco said he would retire in heaven, and so should all Salesians. The controversy was never really settled, but all mention of retirement was hushed. The director at the time concluded that in the community, some were designated as “salaried” and others as “non-salaried.” He accepted this compromise, although I think he rolled his eyes in frustration.

Now Fr. Mario is permanently non-salaried and retired, whether he likes it or not, enjoying his merited place in the Salesian garden, with his dear parents, his “second mother,” the Servant of God Fr. Carlo Braga, Salesian confreres, and countless other people he ministered to during his 93 years of life of glorifying the Lord.

We miss you deeply, but are happy that you now enjoy, pain-free, the glorious presence of the Lord with his mother Mary. We have remembered him in life, let us not forget him in death.

December 20, 2017

Fr. John Itzaina, SDB