First Part



The demise of Fr. Antonio Riva on May 27, 1862. With the long beard is Bro. Luigi Tacchini. Sitting with liturgical vestments is Fr. Ignazio Borgazzi. Under the tent, from left: an Irish seminarian named Roland; Frs. Gaetano Favini, Simeone Volonteri and Gaetano Origo. The other six are Chinese seminarians. Printed in 1873.

The *Impossible Mission* of the Milan Seminary

The first missionaries of Milan, who arrived in Hong Kong in 1858, were two priests, a catechist and a convert from Melanesia, today's Papua New Guinea. Melanesia was the first mission of the Seminary of the Foreign Missions of Milan (Seminario per le Missioni Estere di Milano, also called Seminario Lombardo i.e. Lombard Seminary). In the late 1840s, the Marist Fathers had informed Propaganda Fide that their efforts in Melanesia had failed and that they were abandoning their mission. Their missionaries had either been killed, fallen ill or been driven away by the indigenous population. The missionaries of the Seminary of the Foreign Missions of Milan, founded on July 31, 1850 by Bishop Angelo Ramazzotti, were looking for their first assignment and asked to take over the Melanesia mission. It was an insane idea, made understandable only in the light of their extreme faith. When Propaganda Fide hesitated to send promising young people to what they considered as forsaken islands and proposed other missions instead, including Hong Kong, the missionaries protested. They preferred the challenge of such an 'impossible mission', and one that had been turned down by other missionary groups. The Rook and Woodlark Islands, chosen by the missionaries of Milan, were and still are, off any strategic trade route and were technically cut off from the rest of the world.

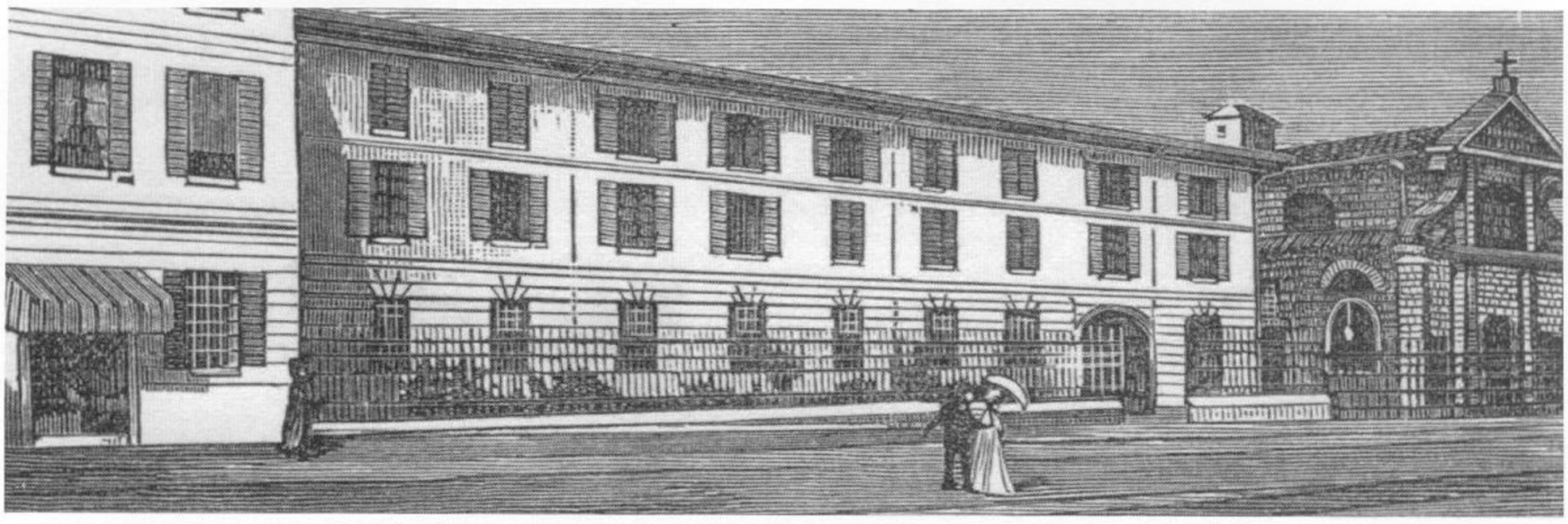
The desire of the missionaries to find a challenging site where they could live the missionary life in a heroic fashion, and their willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice -- to offer the gift of one's own life for the salvation of souls — reveals the depth of their motivation.

Heroic ventures

The Seminary of the Foreign Missions of Milan was founded as an implementation of the missionary thrust initiated by Pope Pius IX. He also inspired the founding of the Seminary of Saints Peter and Paul. The two seminaries were joined in 1926 to form PIME.

During Pope Pius IX's long pontificate, the Church experienced a major missionary boom, along with a flourishing of devotional practices. Partly due to the rise of Romanticism in Europe in the 19th century, young people of both genders threw themselves voluntarily in unprecedented numbers into ventures they considered "heroic". In short, the missionary concepts of the 19th century, as shared by the missionaries who landed in Hong Kong or worked in the rest of China, were: cross the seas and oceans, live among unknown peoples, face all sorts of perils, offer one's life for the salvation of souls, even at the cost of martyrdom.

These ideals fired the significant increase in missionary work in the second half of the 19th century. Tens of thousands of letters kept in the archives of missionary institutes all over Europe bear witness to this. Rather than being an outlet for the political imperialism of Europe's superpowers, the missionary activity inspired by Pius IX was his way of opposing and contrasting the political operations of Europe's expansionism.



The seminary of St. Calocero, the first see of the Seminary of the Foreign Missions of Milan, also known as St. Calocero Seminary. Printed in 1884.

Most assuredly the young missionaries of Milan did not at all share the colonialist ambitions of other Europeans, and colonialist attitudes did not play any role whatsoever in the choice of their missionary destination. In their idealism, they preferred the islands of Melanesia to the new British colony that was rapidly acquiring political, commercial and religious clout due to the transfer of the Procure from Macao to Hong Kong.

Mission impossible

The expedition to Melanesia, consisting of seven missionaries led by Fr. Paolo Reina, set sail from London on Holy Saturday 1852 and reached Rook Island in October of the same year and, shortly afterwards, the island of Woodlark.

Three years later, drained of energy, the Italian missionaries accepted that their mission had failed and withdrew from the two islands. Out of the seven young men, who had left Italy in good health, only two were still fit and strong: Fr. Angelo Ambrosoli who went on to Sydney, Australia; and Fr. Timoleone Raimondi, who would later become bishop of Hong Kong. Of the rest, two had died shortly after their arrival: Bro. Giuseppe Corti succumbed to malaria on Rook Island and Fr. Giovanni Mazzucconi was killed on Woodlark Island in September 1855. Fr. Carlo Salerio, who collected a considerable amount of precious ethnographic and geographic data, returned to Italy due to health reasons and died in 1870 at the age of 43. Fr. Paolo Reina, the first Milan missionary to set foot in Hong Kong, fell grievously ill and died a few years later (1861); Bro. Luigi Tacchini, subsequently a missionary in Hong Kong, had also endured severe hardships in Melanesia.

In 1980, PIME returned to Papua New Guinea, 125 years after they first arrived in the islands, and in 1986 PIME was entrusted with a large territory, which included, beside a boundless stretch of ocean, the little archipelago of Woodlark.

The defeat of the missionaries of Milan, as mentioned above, had its tragic apex in the killing of Fr. Giovanni Mazzucconi, the heart and soul of the new Lombard Seminary. Pope John Paul II declared him a Blessed martyr in 1983. Fr. Mazzucconi, who was returning to Woodlark after a rest period in Sydney, was massacred together with the entire crew of the vessel Gazzelle.

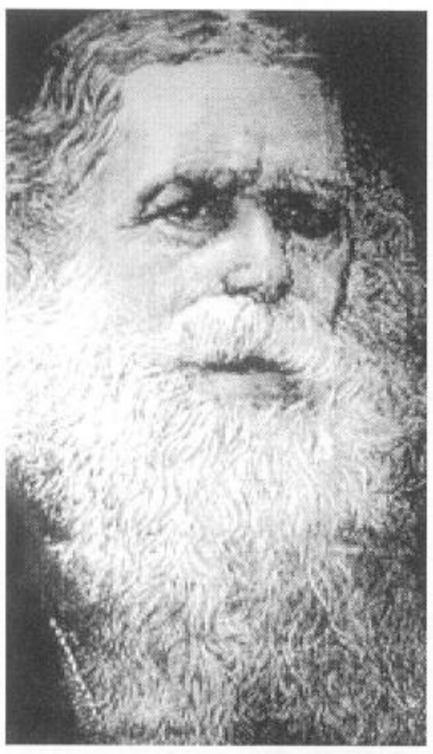
Fr. Raimondi, who excelled over his companions in initiative and spirit of adventure, in December 1856, led an expedition to Woodlark to look for his lost



confrere. Thanks to the information provided by Puarer, a native of Woodlark who had witnessed the massacre of the Gazzelle, Fr. Raimondi was able to reconstruct what had happened to Fr. Mazzucconi.

A romantic adventurer

In the wake of the Papua debacle, the missionaries spent two years in Sydney, awaiting instructions from Rome and Milan about what to do next. While in Sydney they received a communication from Msgr. Carlos Cuarteron, a traveler, a liberator of slaves, a ship captain and a missionary of Spanish and Italian extraction; a typical romantic adventurer of the 19th century. Crossing the seas and the oceans from Cadiz to Malaysia, from Singapore to the Moluccas Islands, from the Philippines to Hong Kong, Cuarteron acquired an unparalleled knowledge of the culture, geography and languages of the Malaysian Islands. In 1856, he desired to become a priest and asked Propaganda Fide to be sent as a missionary to Malaysia. He was later appointed as Apostolic Prefect of Labuan and Borneo.



A rare portrait of Msgr. Carlos Cuarteron, the first Apostolic Prefect of Labuan & Borneo.

Msgr. Cuarteron was given, as mission co-workers, two young missionaries from the Foreign Missions of Milan, Fr. Ignazio Borgazzi and Fr. Antonio Riva, both of whom were later assigned to work in Hong Kong. Propaganda Fide gave Msgr. Cuarteron the task of helping Fr. Reina and his companions return to Melanesia and restart their mission with a different strategy, as suggested by Msgr. Cuarteron. The missionaries of Milan were to return to Melanesia, not from Australia but, rather, from Singapore and Hong Kong, and also to keep a supply and support base in one of the two places.

Upon receiving Msgr. Cuarteron's letters and those from Italy containing the new directives, Frs. Reina (head of the mission) and Raimondi, the catechist Tacchini along with Puarer, left Sydney in August 1856 and headed for Manila where Msgr. Cuarteron was awaiting them.

From Manila, after a delay that lasted for a few months, the little group moved to Labuan in March 1857 where they stayed for a year. At last, on February 25, 1858, they set sail from Labuan aboard the brigantine "Pacific". However, Frs. Borgazzi and Riva were left behind as caretakers of the mission of Labuan and Borneo. The plan of the trip was clear: Msgr. Cuarteron would have taken them to Singapore, then to Hong Kong and, in the end, to Dory, in New Guinea, in order to reopen the mission of Micronesia and Melanesia, for which Fr. Reina still held the title of Apostolic Prefect.

An unexpected twist

In Singapore, the missionaries of Milan found a surprise: new orders had arrived from Msgr. Giuseppe Marinoni, the director of the Foreign Missions of Milan, and from Propaganda Fide. They were to stop in Hong Kong to help Msgr. Luigi Ambrosi, Apostolic Prefect of Hong Kong. The missionaries of Milan had thought that it would be a temporary stopover, while waiting for more favorable conditions to restart the Melanesia/Micronesia mission. In Rome, however,

it had already been decided that the "impossible mission" to Melanesia would be scrapped and that Fr. Reina and his companions would be assigned to the Hong Kong mission.

A French navy ship was about to sail to Hong Kong but there was room for only one passenger. Fr. Reina boarded the ship on March 31, 1858 and arrived in Hong Kong in the morning of April 10, while Fr. Raimondi, Bro. Tacchini and Puarer arrived on May 15.



The Church of St. Calocero, after which the Seminary took its name. Printed in 1884.



Hong Kong, April 10, 1858

> *As I was waiting for him, after Mass I caught sight of the steamboat and I rushed to climb aboard to advise him on a few minor things. The good priest [Fr. Paolo Reina] declared himself ready to carry out any task, and I do not doubt his sincerity. Subsequently, we had other opportunities to talk to each other and I am firmly convinced that Divine Providence, at long last, has decided to help out this poor mission of ours with these new arrivals. [...] I realize that with the addition of other members of the Milan Seminary, we could finally accomplish something.*

This is how Msgr. Luigi Ambrosi reported the arrival in Hong Kong of Fr. Paolo Reina to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò, Prefect of Propaganda Fide on April 12, 1858. He was the first of 207 missionaries from the Italian institute who would enter the port of Hong Kong over the next 150 years. Throughout its history and today, Hong Kong stands out as one of PIME's most challenging and beloved missions.

In his letter, Msgr. Ambrosi hinted at the problems present in the small Catholic community in Hong Kong and also at the great hopes generated by the arrival of the new missionaries. He had been informed by Cardinal Barnabò that the missionaries of Milan would help provide a more permanent structure to the Hong Kong mission.

Msgr. Ambrosi, a diocesan priest from Verona, Italy, had been in Hong Kong since 1846, and had been a Procurator of Propaganda Fide and Prefect of Hong Kong since 1855. Msgr. Ambrosi was anxious and, much to his relief, he and Fr. Reina got along well from the start. Msgr. Ambrosi was informed about Propaganda Fide's plan to entrust the Hong Kong Mission and the Procure to the missionaries of Milan as soon as they had adjusted sufficiently well to their new posting. It was therefore crucial to establish good interpersonal rapport, so that the issues so dear to Msgr. Ambrosi's heart and to the Vatican could be handled in the best possible way.

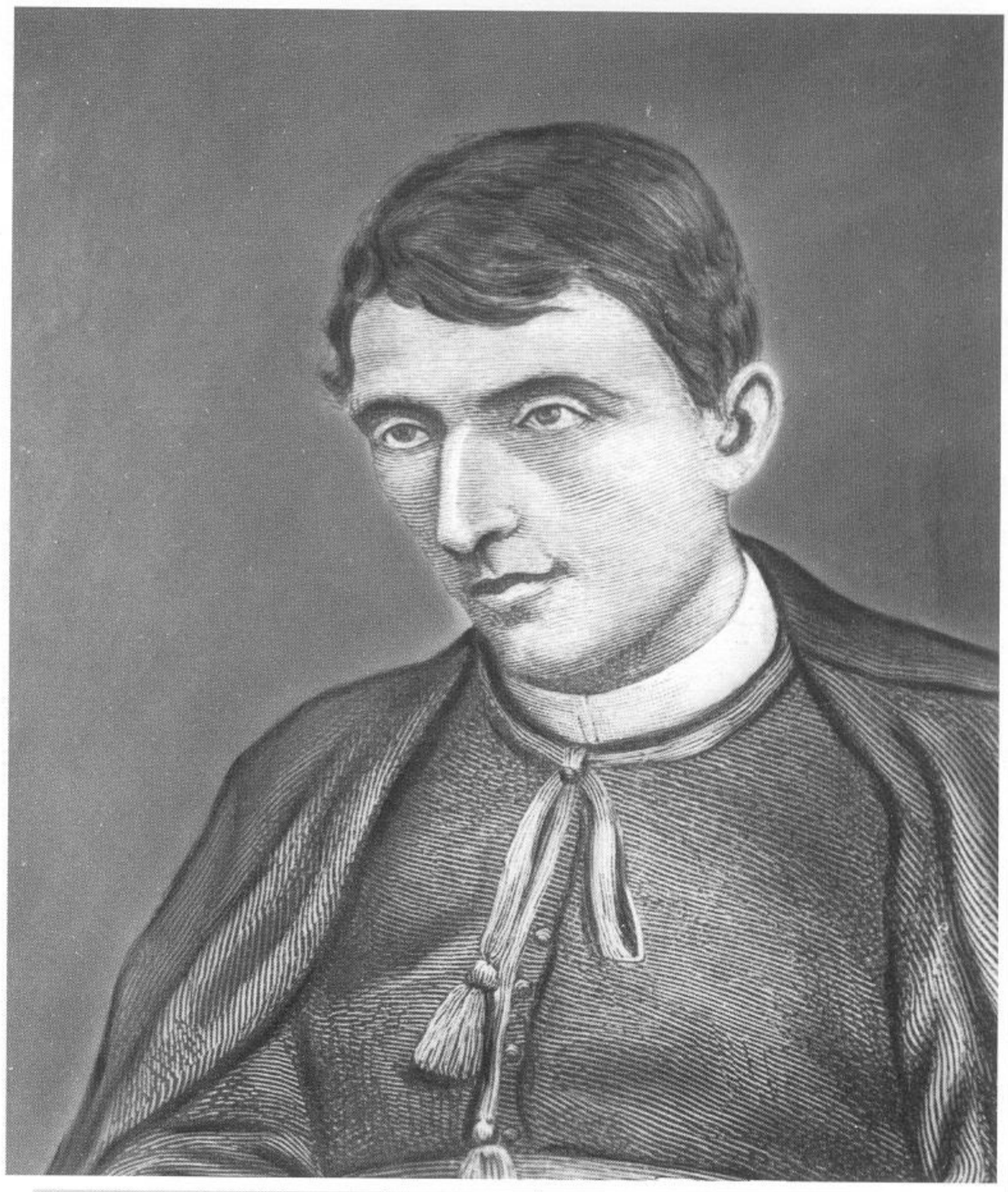
The new missionaries placed themselves at the disposal of Msgr. Ambrosi and the vice-prefect, Fr. Gerolamo Mangieri of the Franciscan Friars Minor of the Observance, who had been stationed there since 1843. Fr Mangieri left Hong Kong for good shortly after their arrival, leaving Fr. Reina the title of vice-prefect. With the arrival of the missionaries of Milan, the Hong Kong mission acquired new stability. Their first tasks were to care for the Portuguese and Euro-Asiatic Catholic communities and provide assistance to soldiers, the sick and inmates.

The first commitments

From the beginning, the missionaries of Milan wished to preach the Gospel to the Chinese living in villages throughout Hong Kong and on the Mainland. Therefore Fr. Raimondi, who was put in charge of the seminary, began to study Chinese.

Bro. Tacchini and Puarer were assigned to Saint Joseph's hospital in Wan Chai, run until then by Fr. Mangieri. Tacchini died in Hong Kong in 1870, at the age of 45, after he had left the Institute and married. Puarer had converted while he was in Manila and had been given the name Giovanni. He continued following Fr. Raimondi to Labuan and Singapore, before winding up in

Hong Kong in 1858. He can be considered as the first voluntary lay missionary in the history of PIME. Once the hospital was closed down, he went to Australia, where he contacted Fr. Angelo Ambrosoli. From that time on, his whereabouts are unknown.



Fr. Paolo Reina, Apostolic Prefect of Melanesia and Micronesia, the first Milan missionary to arrive in Hong Kong.

Fr. Reina, the designated leader of the missionaries of Milan and well-qualified for the role, took care of Catholic soldiers and visited the sick in the hospital. He also became the spiritual director of the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres, implicating himself in the conflict that saw them pitted against the policies of the Hong Kong Mission, in particular against Msgr. Ambrosi. If, out of loyalty, he had to side with Msgr. Ambrosi, who was charging the nuns with insubordination, Fr. Reina tried hard to act as a mediator between the two sides. Yet, all his efforts proved fruitless as the bitter conflict ended up in court.

In the meantime, Fr. Reina had suggested to Msgr. Giuseppe Marinoni to send the Canossian Sisters from Italy, the first six of whom arrived on April 12, 1860, together with Fr. Giuseppe Burghignoli. Fr. Reina also requested other missionaries, describing the spiritual traits required for the Hong Kong Mission:

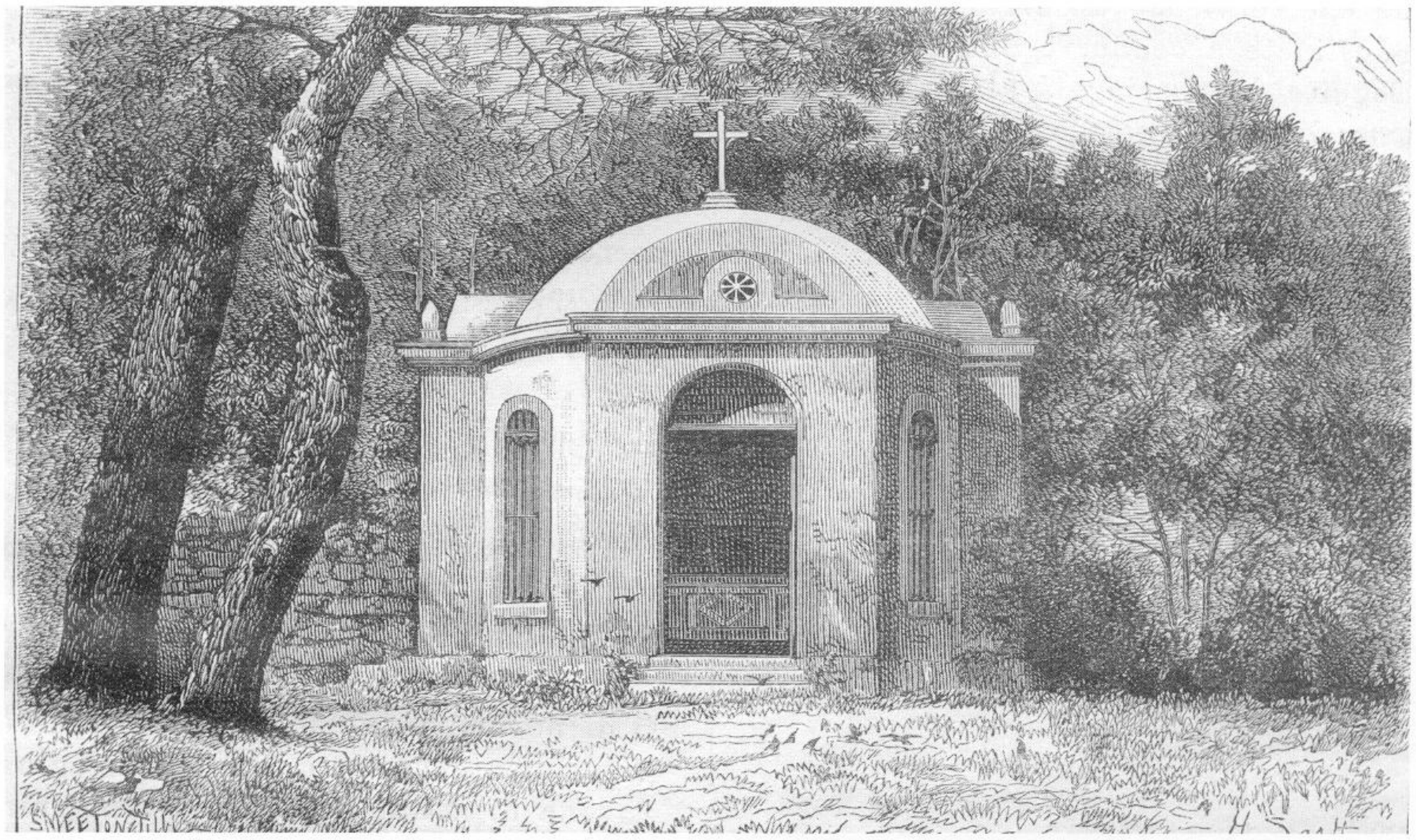
> *The missionary should discipline any ardor or haste: such zeal would not come from God. He should educate his spirit to stay calm, without disorderly thoughts, indifferent to everything. Many, misled from a false zeal, neglect their own perfection and even their health, and do a good that God does not bless; a good that passes in a minute.*

Fr. Reina was able to see the arrival of the first reinforcements from Italy: Frs. Gaetano Favini, Simeone Volonteri and Giacomo Scurati, who arrived on February 7, 1860. In September the same year, Frs. Antonio Riva and Ignazio Borgazzi reached the mission as well.

A letter to a friend

In a letter to his friend Fr. Carlo Salerio, partly reported below, Fr. Reina describes the





The first chapel of St. Michael Cemetery, Happy Valley. It was built as a memorial to Msgr. Luigi Ambrosi, Apostolic Prefect until 1867. Printed in 1878.

many challenges of the Hong Kong mission. There was much to do, and the results were not immediate. Fr. Reina worked generously, but grew weaker and sicker by the day, until he was forced to return to Italy on June 22, 1860. A firstborn of PIME, and the first PIME missionary in Hong Kong, died a saintly death on March 14, 1861, at the young age of 36.

Letter from Fr. Paolo Reina to Fr. Carlo Salerio, Hong Kong, March 9, 1859:

In the city there should be about 3,000 Europeans and 70,000 Chinese. The Catholics altogether number about 3,000: 1,500 Portuguese from Macao, 600 Chinese, 800 sailors from Manila and other places, and about 300 soldiers and other Europeans.

Church attendance by the Portuguese is mediocre. They are rather ignorant, generally speaking, about religion. They don't feel strong attachment to the clergy and, living among the English, learn easily their wrong habits. We tried to organize Catechism classes, but nobody turned up. With the exception of the soldiers, there are very few English Catholics, no more than 20. Some days ago, a soldier sick in bed got converted. We have a man and a woman who are preparing for baptism as well. The conversion of soldiers is quite difficult because they are afraid of being discriminated against. The English government, though boasting about freedom, as regards as religion is concerned, is rather unfair. The other Englishmen respect us, but they don't like to listen to anything about religion. Everybody is here to make money and then return to Europe. When we speak about religion, they beg us to keep silent.

As far as the Chinese are concerned, we baptized 30 of them every year. The main

difficulty is that they don't keep the family here, and therefore they live as they please. Besides, women, who generally are more sensitive and fervent, seem absent from this city. As for the children, the nuns save 200 to 300 of them each year. A Chinese superstition does not allow anyone to die in the house, therefore, when a child gets sick, it is taken (by family members) to the Sisters, receiving in exchange some small compensation. The child is baptized: if he dies, he goes to heaven; if he survives, he is kept in the orphanage. Since bad customs are quite prevalent, many children are orphans. There are many Catholics among the sailors from all nations; however, as they don't attend Church, they are recognized as Catholics only in hospital or in prison, when they are in danger of imminent death.

On the South-western part of Hong Kong island, there are villages of 5,000 to 8,000 people; there are also a mission residence and a chapel, but no priest lives there.

Annexed to the Hong Kong Prefecture, there is also the Chinese Mainland lying six leagues inland in front of Hong Kong Island: this part is very populated. Prefect Ambrosi tells me that there should be at least 200,000 people, and I believe it because Chinese people are like ants.

The origins of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong

Hong Kong was established as an Apostolic Prefecture, independent from Macao Diocese, on April 22, 1841. Fr. Theodore Joset, a Swiss diocesan priest, who was Propaganda Fide's representative in Macao, was nominated as the first Apostolic Prefect. On January 22, 1842 the first Catholic priest set foot in Hong Kong, Fr. Michael Navarro, a Spanish Franciscan. Fr. Joset arrived on March 3, and died a few months later, on August 5. He was able to lay the foundation stone of the first Church, in Wellington Street, dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and founded a missionary station in Wan Chai.

Fr Antonio Feliciani, an Italian Franciscan, was appointed as the new Apostolic Prefect in December 1842. Under his leadership, missionary stations were opened in Stanley and Chai Wan and a local seminary was founded.

In 1847, missionaries of the Paris Foreign Missions (MEP) transferred their Procure from Macao to Hong Kong, and Bishop Augustin Forcade, Apostolic Vicar of Japan, was appointed as the Pro-Prefect of Hong Kong. The following year, the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres arrived in Hong Kong to found the Asile de la St. Enfance in Wan Chai, where they took care of orphans, the sick and the elderly. Mission stations were also opened in Aberdeen and Tsuen Wan.

In 1850, Fr. Feliciani was reappointed as Apostolic Prefect, after the resignation of Bishop Forcade. In 1855, Fr. Feliciani resigned, and Msgr. Ambrosi replaced him. In 1858, the first missionaries of Milan arrived in the colony, according to Propaganda Fide's plan to entrust to them the Prefecture of Hong Kong and the Procure of China missions.

