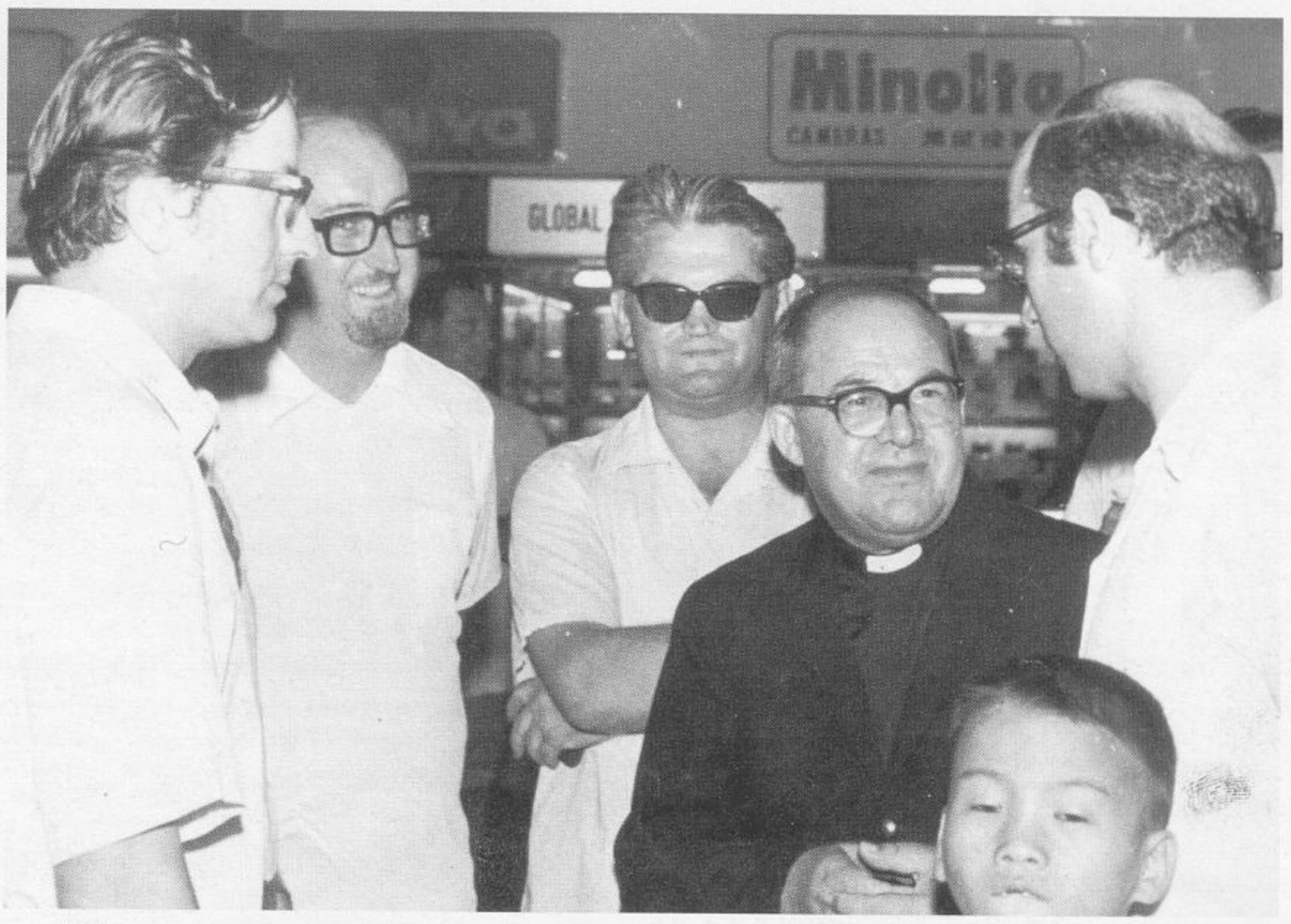
The Unexplained Murder of the Missionary-Baker

Countless throngs of people, both in Mainland China and in Hong Kong were touched by the humble, good-humored and dedicated 'priest-baker'. On the evening of Saturday, September 28, 1974, Fr. Valeriano Fraccaro, 62, was attacked in his bedroom at his Sai Kung residence. He was about to take a bath, when he was brutally killed with a knife taken from the kitchen. His murder deeply shocked the whole of Hong Kong, and especially the people of Sai Kung, who were very familiar with the smiling face and the good-hearted priest. He helped thousands of people; and was liked by everyone. The PIME community was also traumatized by the tragedy, which was unforeseen and equally unexplainable. Particularly shocked were the two priests living with him, the young Fr. Francesco Frontini, who discovered the body sprawled on the floor with blood splattered everywhere, and Fr. Adelio Lambertoni. The killer remains unidentified to this day and the motive for the murder is still unknown. It might be possible that the real target had been Fr. Lambertoni, who was involved in social projects that often collided with the interests of different parties.

For eight years, Fr. Fraccaro had been working and traveling around the villages of Sai Kung. Before that he had served in the Castle Peak District (1960-1966) and in Sha Tin (1954-1960).

He was an itinerant missionary, always on the move visiting villages, families, meeting and chatting with people, especially youngsters. The genuine smile on his face made him very approachable.

Fr. Fraccaro is fondly remembered for being an excellent baker. He learned to bake bread and cakes from his family, which still runs a renowned bakery in Treviso, northern Italy. Fr. Fraccaro distributed his tasty products to refugees, students, the elderly and to whomever needed them. During the influx of refugees in the 1950s and 1960s, a substantial number of people relied on his baking skills for their survival.



Fr. Valeriano Fraccaro is welcomed back to Hong Kong by PIME fathers a few months prior to his murder (1974). Starting from left are: Frs. Dino Doimo, Luciano Lazzeri, Paolo Morlacchi and Giosuè Bonzi.



Valeriano Fraccaro was born in 1913, at Castelfranco Veneto, Treviso, Italy. He was ordained a priest in April 1937 and, a few months later, he left for Shaanxi, China. During his years in Hanzhong, southern Shaanxi, Fr. Fraccaro developed a strong will and courage. After completing his study of the Chinese language, he worked in various districts of the former PIME mission, including Yanzibian, the isolated centre where St. Alberico Crescitelli was martyred. During World War II, he was detained in a concentration camp for almost two years. Upon his release, he resumed his ministry, only to be expelled from China by the Communist authorities in 1952.



Press Conference in Milan, on early October 1974, a few days after the murder of Fr. Valeriano Fraccaro. Frs. Francesco Frontini and Adelio Lambertoni are with Fr. Giacomo Girardi, director of the PIME Missionary Center in Milan, and himself a former missionary to Hong Kong.

New Ways

The PIME community began a long process of discernment about its new role within the Hong Kong Church and society after the 1969 handover of the diocese to Chinese leadership. While the majority of missionaries continued to serve the diocese through pastoral work in parishes, a few who felt the need to explore different ways of serving began looking at new methods of evangelization.

An animated debate arose among the missionaries. At times it became tense, giving rise to opposing views concerning the way to respond to the new diocesan situation and to the changes in society at large. The renewal brought about by Vatican Council II, along with a worldwide wave of calls for justice and service to the poor, also swept through Hong Kong and affected PIME.

A community in conflict

The conflict that affected the PIME community in the 1970s and early 1980s occurred too recently for it to be written about with impartiality. Yet, some attempts can be made to describe the two opposing views that emerged. A larger group of missionaries, mostly older PIMEs, believed that the traditional ways of service had borne good fruit and, consequently, it would be incomprehensible to ignore them in order to pursuit uncertain new paths. They felt the need to keep the Church from skidding out of control and into sure danger, and lived through the renewal with uneasiness because, to them, it seemed without any proven merit. Involvement in social work and efforts to redress injustice were looked upon with suspicion because the primary stress was not on delivering a spiritual message and fostering the sacramental life. Those longing for change were suspected of limiting the actions and image of missionaries to the secular and political spheres.

The conservative missionaries defended the need to continue pastoral care within the traditional frameworks, in particular in parishes, schools and the curia. They also held the view that a PIME could still work as a diocesan administrator if requested by the bishop. For many older missionaries, some of the newly arrived younger missionaries held objectionable ideas and led lifestyles that were hard to understand. In some cases they were even perceived as being subversive. Added to the mix was the fact that a number of missionaries were abandoning the missionary life and even the priesthood, by requesting dispensation from their obligations or by returning to their home countries.

Some of the younger missionaries chided their older colleagues for not appreciating the need for renewal urged by Vatican Council II, and for not carrying out decisions voted upon by the PIME community. This group was trying 'new ways', getting involved in social issues, fighting for justice alongside the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized. According to them, the Gospel had to be proclaimed not only from the pulpit or within the parish boundaries but also, and foremost, whenever people were suffering and experiencing exploitation. There, even though the Church might not have been visibly present, the suffering Christ could be found. According to this group, evangelization meant not only converting people to the Catholic faith, but also expanding





PIME missionaries gathered at PIME House in Clear Water Bay Road on May 29, 1975. Sitting in the middle is Fr. Riccardo Brookes, who celebrates his 60th anniversary of priestly ordination.

the boundaries of the Kingdom of God. These priests wanted to live side by side with people in a spirit of poverty, supporting themselves by holding down a regular secular job. This attitude could be traced back to a global movement for justice which, within the Catholic Church, was mostly identifiable with Liberation Theology. At times, these 'innovators' would contest traditional methods and would object to the perceived fact that, in the course of their long years of service, older confreres had held powerful and influential positions, thus becoming in some cases "quasi unmovable barons".

Numerous meetings and assemblies were held during which PIME's role in Hong Kong was discussed in depth. The famous "two-day gathering" of April 19-20, 1971, marked the acceptance of the "new ways", such as teaching, working with blue-collar workers, caring for the handicapped, the aged and the marginalized. It was also decided, that PIME missionaries would not take administrative and influential positions in the diocesan hierarchy. This decision was reiterated at the "five-day meetings" in November 1973 and also in 1980, at which time some thought was given to a possible commitment to working in the Chinese subcontinent and to returning to the local clergy the management of any fully-fledged parish.

The actual implementation of these decisions made at the assemblies was at times unsatisfactory. Some PIMEs were unable to divest themselves

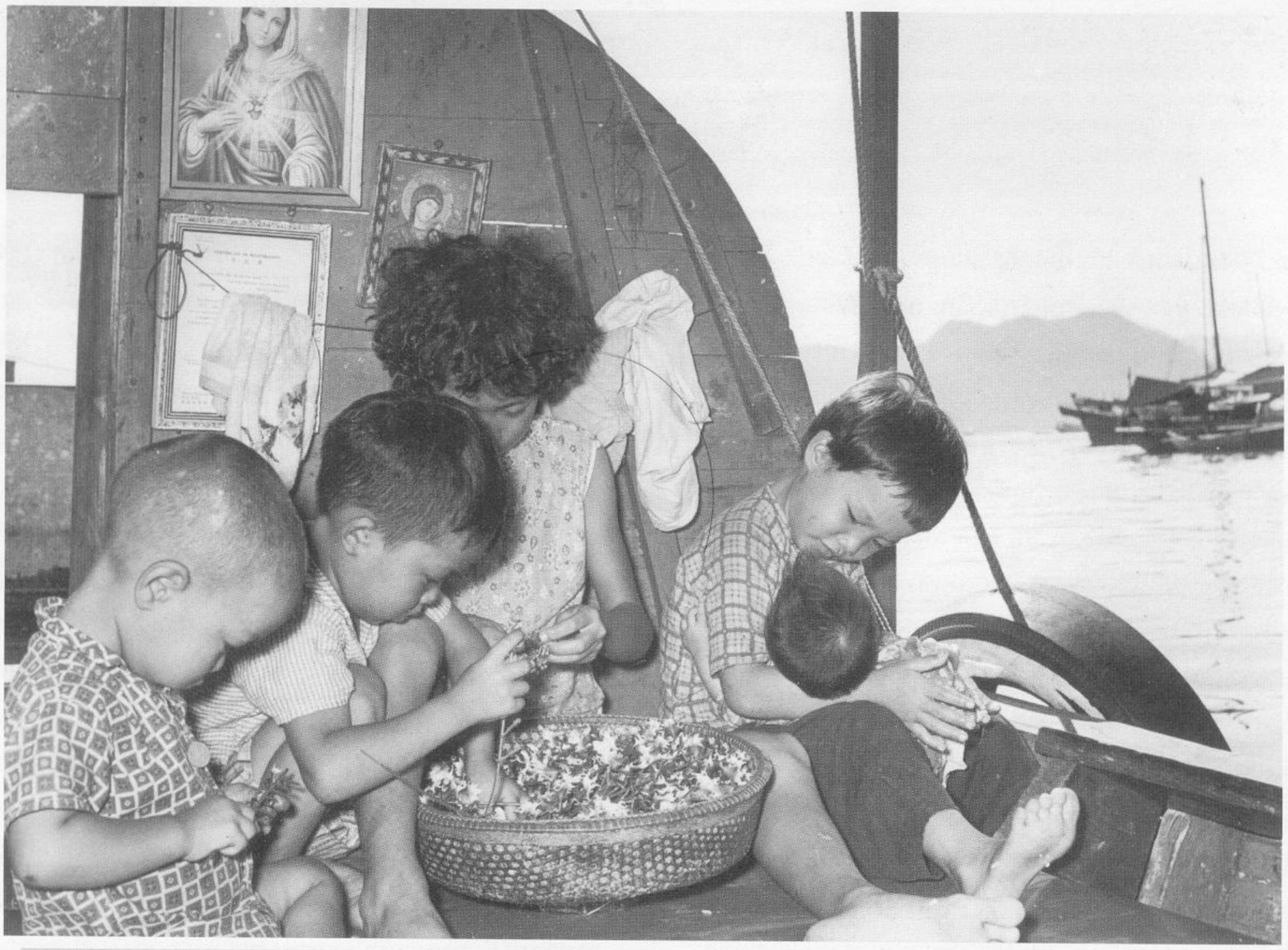
from administrative roles. Among them were: Fr. Edmondo Bruzzone who stayed on as chancellor of the diocese until 1984, Fr. Lido Mencarini who remained as procurator until 1982, Fr. Michele Pagani as archivist until 1993, and Fr. Francesco Lerda who remained at the helm of Caritas-Hong Kong until his death in 2003. Bishop Francis Hsu and his successors did not want to deprive themselves of the services of people with such unquestionable experience and skill.

Social action

Despite these internal difficulties, which at the time many other religious congregations were also experiencing the world over, the PIME missionaries remained without exception, generously involved in missionary work. The fields in which they served varied both in scope and methodology, from evangelization to pastoral care and education, from charitable assistance to social justice.

The 'Monday Group,' started in the 1970's for the purpose of sharing reflections on God's Word, drew together most of the younger priests and became an important venue for the life and orientation of the PIME community. During those years many of the Hong Kong faithful, as in most parts of the world, lived their faith as a commitment to caring for the poor and fighting for social justice. Several PIME missionaries took part in the movement, eventually founding PIME's Social Concern Group.

Following the climate of the age there were occasions when members of the clergy and laity led protests and denounced colonial government social and economic policies, especially



Children from a Catholic family living and working on a boat.





Fr. Franco Cumbo is teaching children on a boat in Yau Ma Tei Typhoon Shelter, where he lived with Fr. Franco Mella for a few years in late 1980s.

concerning the homeless living in shanty towns, peddlers, boat people, 'boat mothers', and so on. Frs. Adelio Lambertoni, Franco Mella, Franco Cumbo, Pietro Zamuner, Francesco Frontini, Renzo Milanese, Franco Gritti, Vittorio Grioni and others were often on the frontline of the protests.

Fr. Grioni dedicated his time and talents to helping juvenile delinquents and Fr. Gritti was committed to assisting the elderly. Some PIMEs chose to work in factories (some full-time and others part-time) in the tradition of France's worker-priests. Their motivation was to share the life of workers, and to bear witness to the Gospel among them. The missionary-workers were Frs. Emilio Leoni, Carlo Tei, Sergio Ticozzi, Gianni Giampietro, Mella and Cumbo. Still others, such as Frs. Nevio Viganò, Zamuner and Ticozzi taught Italian.

In 1986, Frs. Mella and Cumbo went to live on a boat in the typhoon shelter at Yau Ma Tei in Kowloon in order to minister to and share the plight of the boat people. They were instrumental in organizing social and educational initiatives for children and young people in the fishing community.

During the 1980s, Hong Kong found itself enveloped in a crisis created by the arrival of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. Fr. Giacomo Girardi, from Italy, managed to convince the Italian government to send ships to ease the situation with the newcomers. Some of the PIME



Aiding the exceptional flow of Vietnamese refugees (from 1979 into the eighties) required an extra effort by Hong Kong civil and religious institutions.

missionaries, in particular Adelio Lambertoni, visited the refugee camps and protested against the colonial administration for its poor treatment of the Vietnamese.

The tension between the two PIME groups lasted for about 20 years, culminating in the deadlock encountered at the election of the new Regional Superior in 1984. Fr. Fernando Galbiati, who was Superior General at the time, broke the impasse by appointing Fr. Lido Mencarini as Regional Superior. Fr. Mencarini belonged to the older group, as far as mentality was concerned, but enjoyed everyone's respect for his experience, humility, goodness and impartiality. In 1990, however, Fr. Milanese, a leader among the younger group was elected superior. It was a clear indication that the internal divisions had been overcome. The next thorny issue to confront PIME in Hong Kong was a shortage of personnel and the rising age of the existing missionaries. Consequently, even though the 1987 contract with the diocese had committed 40 PIME members to serve its needs, only about 30 were actually available in the 1990's.

