Second Part



Bishop Domenico Pozzoni with the priests serving in the Vicariate. Only Fr. Andrew Leong is absent. The picture was taken about 1906.

Let the Missionaries Tell Their Story

The correspondence of the missionaries comprises an immense number of letters and, for the most part, is kept in the archives of religious orders and missionary institutes. It is not easy to access these invaluable sources of information. One has to be versed in the language in which they were written. The condition of the manuscripts is often precarious, the deciphering of names, places and events complex, and their sheer quantity, daunting. The archives containing these manuscripts are open for consultation, yet, given the manuscripts' complexity and fragility, only well-equipped and competent experts can gain access to them.

This is true also of the PIME archives in Rome. There is a file for each missionary, containing letters written to superiors, confreres, families, benefactors, and so on. It is an inexhaustible mine of information and stories, often as fascinating as they are unknown. Some letters to family, friends and benefactors did not find their way into the archives because they were kept by their owners or, simply, destroyed or lost.

Letters do not lie...

The PIME files contain information on all sorts of obscure, little-known missionaries; letters from superiors about their flock or to families when a missionary has died due to illness and from missionaries complaining about their superiors, etc. The letters make it possible to reconstruct personal events, often minor ones. They transport the reader back in time and into the private lives of the writers, revealing their problems, accomplishments, sadness, defeats and dramas. Such is the story of Fr. Eugenio Taverna, which will be told later in this chapter.

Letters do not lie. In them, the missionary bares his soul; gives the best or the worst of himself; writes the noblest or most abject things about himself, his confreres or superiors. Due to their personal and private nature, letters to superiors and confreres are a singular literary genre, most of the time void of the pious or polite form found in edifying articles printed in missionary magazines, or in letters written to reassure families of a missionary's health.

It is possible to learn from the letters what the missionary truly thought of himself, along with the reasons that led him to leave for the missions, and to stay on despite the difficulties and suffering. These letters reveal men of flesh and bone, conditioned by the age in which they lived, yet with pronounced personalities, people capable of independent thought and judgment. These letters often deal with the institute's internal issues hence, criticism of confreres and superiors, abound. Complaints for being misunderstood by confreres and superiors recur. There are reports on those who had to leave their mission assignments, on those who had to change their mission assignment or even abandon the missionary life due to illness, unresolved conflict or severe disappointment.



A group of women and children receiving assistance from a Canossian sister at Sacred Heart convent.

... but do not tell the whole story

As part of their official duties, local superiors wrote to their Milan and Rome superiors on a regular basis. Most of the missionaries, instead, only wrote when special events and situations required. For this reason, some of those letters sound dramatic or polemic. This does not mean that the missionaries often quarreled; it simply indicates that, frequently, quarrels were the reason for writing because they needed to be resolved. Situations of tranquility and cooperation did not call for extensive consideration.

Some missionaries could write with ease and skill, others would write only whenever strictly necessary. Frequently, it was those men with litigious and difficult personalities who wrote the most, to voice their grievances and demand action. Laidback and industrious lay missionaries and priests were usually too busy working to feel the need to write often. Consequently, letters and documents kept in archives, even though an essential source of information and of great value, do not offer the whole picture.

It will never be possible to completely know what the missionaries were like and what life was like for them and their communities. But, in reality, such incompleteness does not matter. Whoever has faith in God knows that He alone is aware of the stories of everyday life, even those hidden and overlooked. Nobody will ever be able to recount them, yet they are no less valuable, significant and meritorious.



A letter from Hong Kong

Fr. Eugenio Taverna, born in Turin in 1865 and ordained to the priesthood in 1895, at the age of 30, was posted to northern Henan where, due to serious difficulties, he remained for less than two years. He



St. Louis Reformatory, from which Fr. Eugenio Taverna wrote his dramatic letter.

arrived in Hong Kong in January 1898. The reason for his transfer is not precisely known, but most probably was due to health problems, along with a serious clash with the local superior. He became, for a while, the director of the Hong Kong Reformatory, even though his name is not on the list of Evangelical Workers in the Mission of Hong Kong *(Operarii Evangelici in Missione Sciamchiamensi)* of the diocesan archives. His name is on the list of priests who worked in Hong Kong found in the Rome PIME archives and in the 2005 PIME Directory. Fr. Taverna left Hong Kong in March 1904, and the Institute the following year to work in the diocese of Macao. A letter from Fr. Giuseppe Carabelli, written in September 1905, mentions that Fr. Taverna died at the age of 40, after 10 years of missionary activity, including six in Hong Kong.

Fr. Taverna is unknown, a missionary of little importance, perhaps beset with some problems since he had to change his mission assignment twice. His existence is mentioned here because of a dramatic letter he wrote and which is kept, along with thousands of other missionaries' letters in the PIME archives. What Fr. Taverna's real difficulties were, is of little importance: if they related to his health, his personality or his morals. It is not necessary to pass judgment on his case, because what is intriguing is its emblematic nature, an icon of sort.

Nor is Fr. Taverna's case unique or rare. Many missionaries assigned to Hong Kong remained there only briefly, without leaving any significant evidence of their work. For various reasons, not always explicitly stated, numerous missionaries were transferred to other missions. Others returned to their country of origin for good, some also leaving the Institute or the priesthood.

In recounting the history of PIME in Hong Kong, it is worth including some personal accounts of ordinary missionaries in order to provide a more complete picture of what life was like. History often focuses on heroes and victors and on dramatic events, but it is good to remember the vast majority of people who were at the same

time generous and weak, courageous and timid, capable and stifled by difficulties. Christians believe in a God who leads history in which all little, individual stories find their significance. Therefore, Christians ought to be grateful to God for having called so many unknown missionaries, who are negligible only in the eyes of those who study or write history from the standpoint of efficiency, but not so in those of Divine Providence. Fr. Taverna was not less generous and courageous than other missionaries. He too left his home and country for mission lands.

There exists a world of secret dramas in the life of many missionaries, a world of inner pain that remains mostly unknown and overlooked. There are the pains caused by illness, especially mental, by inability to adjust to a new environment or to learn a new language. There are the pains caused by insensitivity or clashes with a confrere or a superior, and even one stemming from a person's own weaknesses or spiritual, vocational, emotional or moral immaturity. All these pains are of value before God and, in their own right, they are part of the History of Salvation for which the mission works.

West Point Orphanage, Hong Kong, March 11, 1898

Most illustrious and most reverend Monsignor, [Fr. Giacomo Scurati, Superior General]

Bishop Luigi Piazzoli is happy that I stay in his mission, so am I. However, I regret leaving northern China, yet you decided so and that's the end of it. We will stay here to do battle against the enemy of the Gospel. [...] I have to further my study of Chinese, a little Portuguese, and English in order to help out my superior. I will not go to work in Mainland China for the bishop finds me more suited to work among the young Chinese at the Reformatory. Besides, my legs would be unable to withstand the apostolic hardships required to work on the Mainland since they are as weak as they were before. I have been at the Reformatory for two months already as its director, and I am happy. The bishop loves me a lot, for he is quite a loving person even if he doesn't show it on the outside.



It saddens me that Bishop Scarella [Stefano Scarella, Apostolic Vicar of northern Henan] had a very bad impression of me. It is unclear to me what might have been the reason for all this. While it is true that I am not yet a saint, it is also true that I never lacked good will. If there were some flaws, were they so big that they would create, such a bad impression of me so quickly?

In Henan, I suffered more in one year than in my previous 31 years of life: heavy fevers, cholera, vomiting, excruciating belly aches especially due to dysentery for four long months, swelling of my limbs, etc.[...] I had





All the Milan missionaries in July 1900. Bishop Luigi Piazzoli, whose portrait is on a chair, was in Italy. Fr. Eugenio Taverna is the first sitting from left. This is the first photograph portraying the missionaries of Milan in existence.

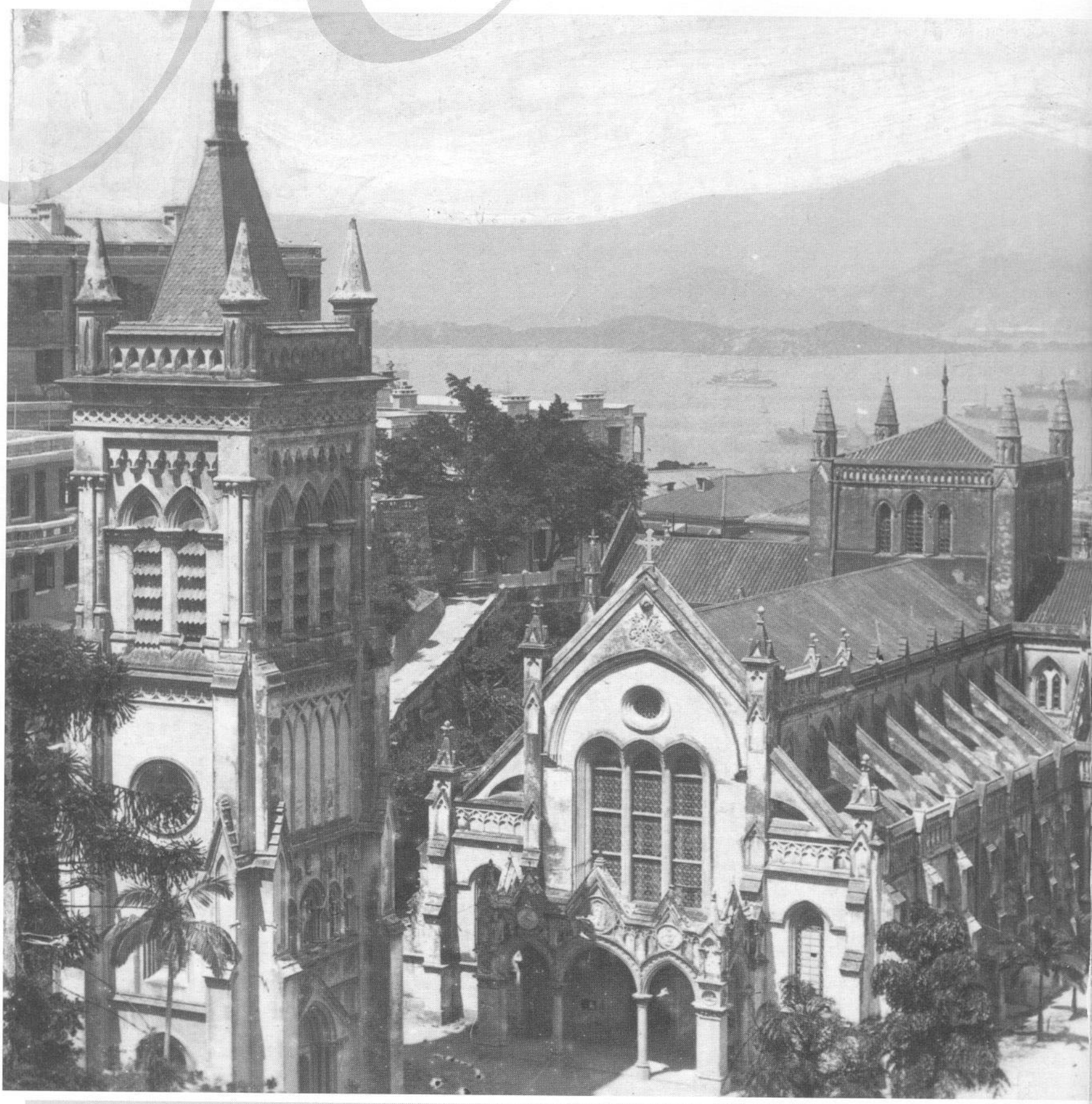
enough knowledge of Chinese to understand people talking about ordinary subjects and also enough to make myself understood most of the time. I loved the Chinese very much, and I loved to converse with children. I left Henan temporarily with the permission of the local bishop and not for a whim but, rather, to save my life, which I saw as being in imminent mortal danger. Had the bishop thought about my health a little more, I would not have left my assignment. In Turin, dogs receive better treatment when they are sick. This is the plain truth. [...] I left as a beggar, without sufficient clothes to keep warm. I was very deeply embarrassed and I could not go to see a doctor because I did not have enough money to pay him. In Henan, I learned a new thing, i.e., one's money, deposited with the bishop, is not one's own any more, but has a new owner. [...]

I must have made a very good impression on Bishop Piazzoli because he kept me in his mission and sent me to run the Reformatory. What a diversity of viewpoints in this world of ours! Therefore, I beg you to consider me as a true missionary in Hong Kong and to try to fix things up with my beloved bishop. [...]

Please, excuse the length of this letter and my lack of manners.

Your very affectionate son in Christ, Eugenio D. Taverna.

I Am Ready for Anything!



Hong Kong Cathedral was built in the 1880s under the supervision of Fr. Bernardo Viganò.



Personality-wise, Bishop Luigi Piazzoli was very different from his predecessor Bishop Timoleone Raimondi. He did not have the same ambitious character and was hesitant in accepting the

episcopal nomination, which took place on January 11, 1895. The new bishop was then 50 and with many years of apostolic experience in the region. Since 1891, he had been pro-vicar of the diocese and procurator of Propaganda Fide. In 1894, a year before his nomination, people were impressed by his heroic assistance to those struck by the plague. Bishop Piazzoli was a man of dedication, ready to make whatever sacrifice was required of him.



The Bubonic Plague

The Bubonic Plague broke out in Hong Kong for the first time in May 1894, and continued until October. Fr. Giovanni Spada wrote:

We learned that more than 20,000 people died of the plague in Canton. Here about 35 people die a day, all of them Chinese, except for two Portuguese. As soon as the plague broke out, the government of the colony turned a ship and a hospital into quarantine quarters. In spite of this, so many people die in their homes.

In a few months, more than 80,000 people, an enormous segment of the population, left Hong Kong. Its schools shut down and the government made an appeal for people to volunteer to work in its hospitals. The people of Hong Kong, Protestants included, were edified by the courage displayed by the fathers and the sisters who offered to assist those struck by the plague. Fr. Luigi Piazzoli was in charge of the quarantine quarters on land and Fr. Pietro De Maria of the ones at sea. Six Canossian sisters cared of the sick as nurses, one of them died of the plague on August 4.



Fr. Bernardo Viganò wears the Jijin, the ceremonial hat that the priests used to wear during liturgical celebrations. Permission to wear this hat was granted by Paul V in 1615, and its use was discontinued following a decision of the Shanghai Synod in 1924.

In June 1894, two world-famous bacteriologists arrived in Hong Kong and competing against each other, sought to identify the bacterium. They were a Swiss scientist Alexandre Yersin and a Japanese scientist Kitasato Shibasaburo, who had already discovered the tetanus bacterium. In the end, it was Yersin who discovered the organism responsible for the plague outbreak. According to the medical journals reporting the story, he had a decisive advantage due to the assistance from an Italian missionary. The missionary is Fr. Bernardo Viganò, whom Yersin chose as his assistant, interpreter and guide. Being a military chaplain, Fr. Viganò helped him to overcome bureaucratic obstacles and other difficulties. In particular, thanks to Fr. Viganò's closeness to the soldiers, he found a way for Dr. Yersin to do his research directly on corpses

of plague victims, even though according to the law, they should have been disposed of.

The colony had yet to recover from the consequences of the 1894 plague, when there was a new outbreak in 1896, lasting from April to August. However this time both the authorities and the people of Hong Kong had gained some useful knowledge about the plague. Thus the number of victims reached about 1,000, while 25,000 left the colony. Fr. Piazzoli, who had become bishop in the meantime, was, once again, outstanding in the help he provided to those affected.

The plague resurfaced almost annually. It would show up in spring, peak in July, and wind down gradually until it would disappear completely by autumn. According to some estimates, its victims from 1894 to 1929 numbered more than 24,000, 90 percent of whom died.

The New Territories

On account of the lease of the New Territories to Great Britain, in 1898 the district of San On was split into two areas: the district of Po On, in China; and the New Territories under British rule. The agreement between the two governments was reached on June 9. The governor, Henry Blake, took possession of the New Territories in April 1899 with the hoisting of the English flag in Tai Po. Among segments of the populace this agreement created discontent, which resulted in some demonstrations. The Italian missionaries did not take sides on the issue.

The establishment of the New Territories spared the area of civil disorder that ensued from the uprisings against imperial rule and the various movements instigated by the revolutionary atmosphere against foreigners and Christians on the Mainland. On the other hand, Fr. Giuseppe Zamponi lamented the fact that the British administration had brought religious relativism to the colony and its districts:

> *Nowadays, these places are parched lands and one finds nothing but disappointment; all-the-more now under English rule they are exposed to the foolish and godless maxim that one religion is as good as the next one.*



Rosary Church was blessed in 1905 by Fr. Pietro De Maria.

Rosary Church

Under the leadership of Bishop Piazzoli, pastoral work increased in the peninsula of Kowloon, which was growing ever more densely populated. When the Boxer rebellion occurred in China in 1900, it forced many Europeans to seek refuge in Hong Kong. A large number of Indian and English soldiers were transferred from India. A conspicuous number of Catholic soldiers were stationed not too far from the Canossian convent in Tsim Sha Tsui. The number of civilians likewise increased; thus a good number of Catholic families were housed in the area. The sisters' small chapel proved insufficient to accommodate all the faithful. Dr.



Antonio S. Gomes and his wife, Donna Elena, volunteered to pay for the building of a new Church, and the Canossian sisters donated part of their land, and the beautiful Rosary Church, still standing today, was inaugurated on May 27, 1905 by Fr. Pietro De Maria.

Sickness and death of Bishop Luigi Piazzoli

Almost 10 years after he was appointed, Bishop Piazzoli grew ill. He developed a high fever, became extremely weak and incapable of eating. In 1904, the doctors urged him Bishop Piazzoli to return to Italy in an attempt to find a cure for his ailments, although he was fully aware that his health was compromised. Before leaving, the bishop put everything in order as if it were the day before his death. He entrusted the pro-vicar, Fr. De Maria, with the documents and the administration of the mission, which included 11 members of the Milan Institute and 10 Chinese priests. He left Hong Kong on August 4, escorted by Fr. Domenico Pozzoni, who carried with him the Sacred Oils. He received a warm welcome in Milan and in his native village, Alzano Maggiore. He was then admitted to the Fatebenefratelli Hospital where Milan's archbishop, Cardinal Andrea Ferrari (beatified in 1987), paid him a visit. He died on the day after Christmas.

Fr. Pozzoni, who assisted Bishop Piazzoli until the final moments of his life, describes Bishop Piazzoli as a humble leader with the following words:

> *Under his watch, the number of Christians increased considerably, especially in Mainland China where more than a thousand adults were baptized. The Christians, who are indeed good and zealous, loved him passionately, drawn, as they have been by his amiable disposition, his zeal and his outstanding charity. These conversions were most of all the fruit of his spirit of endurance of all toils and self-denial. Bishop Piazzoli displayed a spirit of total abnegation; actually, in his genuine humility and modesty, he appeared amiable and pleasant to the point that all, even the lowliest could approach him, and everyone, upon approaching him, would feel free to joke around with him. 'I am ready for anything' and 'as it pleases God' were phrases always on his lips. Having said them throughout his life, he attained the grace to repeat them also at the very end. 'I am ready for anything, as it pleases God,' were the last words he uttered before dying.*



Bishop Luigi Piazzoli with a group of priests serving in the Vicariate (ca. 1901-1904).

The Kwai Shin Mission

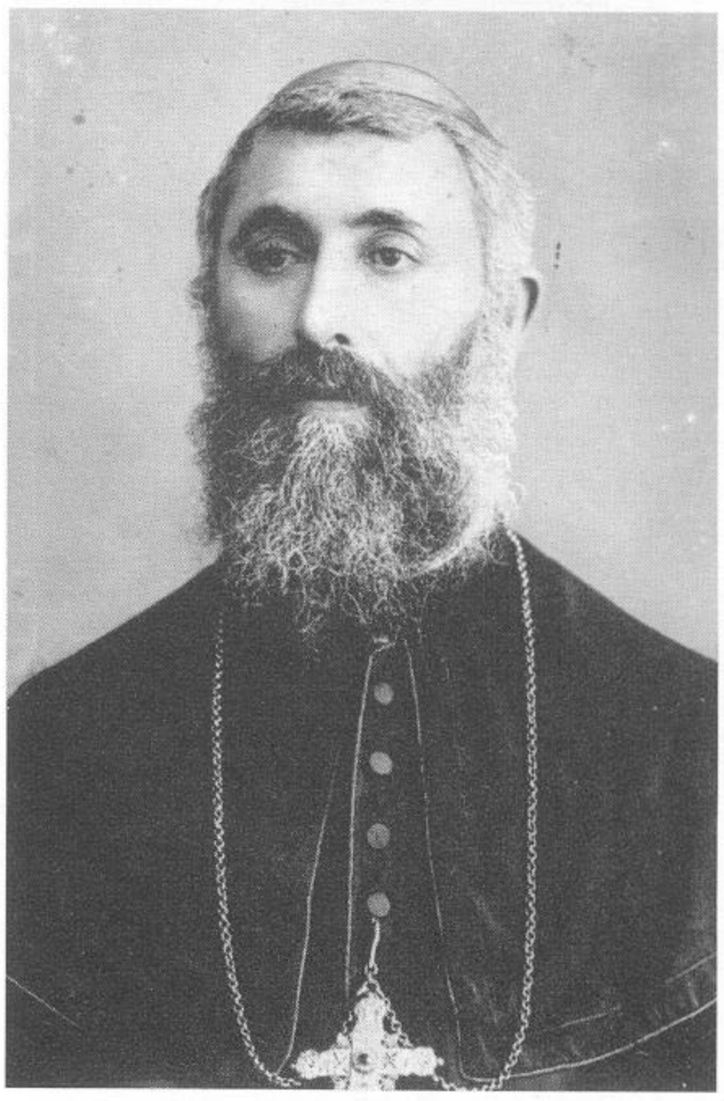
The Mainland district of Kwai Shin (from 1911 called Wai Yeung) was added to the Vicariate in 1874. The evangelization of districts in China was the source of great hope, as Bishop Timoleone Raimondi wrote in 1878:

> *A main focus of interest for us is extending the mission into Mainland China where the vicariate has a stretch of land and where a fine field fills us with joy for the future: here are visible the results of the concrete progress made by the mission.*

First impression about the district of Kwai Shin

In April 1875, Frs. Luigi Piazzoli and Andrew Leong had scouted the area up to Kwai Shin's main center at Wai Chow. The first description given by Fr. Piazzoli was not flattering, but still moderately hopeful:

> *Bishop Raimondi sent me to visit the new part of the mission that Propaganda Fide was pleased to add to the Hong Kong mission. The district I visited is called Kwai Shin, which means 'restored to good'. Unfortunately this is a misnomer. People there not only are pagans, but also with an awful reputation. Of the thieves caught in Hong Kong, eight out of 10 hail from this cursed district. In the main town's hotel where I was staying, people were counterfeiting money round the clock and without any fear of getting caught. They are, of course, opposed to Europeans. Some years ago, a few Protestant ministers from Canton, traveling on the river by boat, reached a marketplace in the district. They opened a school and began distributing Bibles to those who wanted one and*



Fr. Luigi Piazzoli (later Bishop) was the first missionary from Milan to visit the district of Kwai Shin in 1875.

> *also to those who did not want any. In less than a month, they were forced to flee and everything was burned to the ground. Up to now, they have not been able to return. Even a French missionary was forced to withdraw and his catechist was beaten up. Seven years later, he has yet to set foot back there. The few catechumens he managed to attract were caught, beaten and robbed. It was heartening for me, though, to listen to two of them telling me, with happy faces, what they had suffered. After seven years of neglect, much to my surprise, I found about 40 baptized people and some catechumens. To receive baptism or to go to confession, they have to walk for two or three days. They are truly fervent. With such a foundation, I am confident that, if God helps us setting up a station there, we could do a lot of good. We would not be in want of difficulties but,*





The Church of Ping Shan in Kwai Shin (later Wai Yeung).

from what I can see, I think that the people are not as hostile as they were in the past.

Dying for the faith

A movement of conversion started in Tao Yuen, in Kwai Shin district, where in 1877 Fr. Piazzoli bought a piece of land, with a contract signed by the local mandarin. On it, he intended to build a chapel and a residence. He assigned Fr. Andrew Leong to start the construction. However, the local villagers, instigated by an individual nicknamed Tai Ho-Pau (which means 'Big Bag'), a fierce foe of the Christians and a tyrant in the region, began harassing the workers. The mandarin refused to confirm the building decree, and Fr. Piazzoli appealed to the Guangzhou authorities, which acknowledged his right to build the residence and the Church. But the local opposition increased and the mandarin was persistent in his aloofness and negligence.

On November 21, 1878, Fr. Piazzoli witnessed a Christian by the name of Chin Kim-sin being taken by 10 armed men, while another was wounded by rifle shot. Other Christians were taken and tied up. Fr. Piazzoli's house was attacked and overtaken by an armed gang, while he was manhandled and robbed. The following



A Mainland Christian village where the people are affected by leprosy.

day he managed to flee but he learned that seven Christians had been taken hostage. Two of them were released after they apostatized; the other five were killed and burnt. When Fr. Piazzoli went for the umpteenth time to visit the mandarin in order to file a complaint, he was held in custody by the authorities for several days.

In the meantime, relatives of the five martyrs were subjected to all kinds of vexations and were forbidden to file a complaint until they, under force, signed documents exonerating the assassins. For the next two years the situation remained the same: it was impossible to build a residence, since, on top of everything else, Fr. Piazzoli had a price on his head.

The situation in Tao Yuen began to improve a little two years later. The Christians returned to their village escorted by the mandarin, but were not offered any restitution for the property stolen from them. Fr. Piazzoli was advised to steer clear of the area. Meanwhile, the anti-Western and anti-Christian climate worsened on account of the conflict between France and China over Vietnam (1884-1885). Thus, the presence and the work of the missionaries in Tao Yuen were discontinued. The Christians who had suffered persecution in the Kwai Shin district, found refuge in Kowloon City where they built homes around St. Francis chapel.



Fr. Domenico Pozzoni succeeded Fr. Luigi Piazzoli in Kwai Shin (1885).

Slow progress

By the end of 1885, Fr. Domenico Pozzoni, recently arrived from Italy, was assigned to work with Fr. Piazzoli in the San On and Kwai Shin districts, in view, eventually, of taking his place. Seven years later Fr. Pozzoni reported on the situation in Kwai Shin, where progress in evangelization was slow:

We can safely say that we are just at the beginning, having only three small communities. The first has about 30 Christians, all very good, and about 20 catechumens. There is a chapel, a room for the missionary and schools built half by the missionary and half by a rather wealthy and generous Christian family. The second community has only about 10 Christians and it has a couple of small rooms so old that they might collapse any time. They are rented by the father, who uses one of them as a chapel. Lastly, the third community has more than 10 Christians, but they still have no room. In other places, scattered across this district and rather isolated, we have a few other Christians and catechumens. At the present time, in this district there are two priests only, a Chinese and myself; and we are always on the go.