Defensor Civitatis

When Japan invaded China in 1937, Hong Kong was already suffering its own difficulties; struggling to deal with an outbreak of cholera and recover from two violent typhoons that claimed 1,000 lives and caused widespread destruction. An influx of refugees from the Mainland, with their burden of needs and horrific stories, put considerable pressure on the city and demanded an extraordinary display of good will from local residents. From July 1937 to the summer of the following year, more than half a million people found shelter in the colony with 30,000 of them forced to sleep on the streets.

The Catholic Church was on the frontline of the efforts made to deal with the situation. Bishop Enrico Valtorta urged everyone, those in Hong Kong and in the Mainland, to show charity towards the displaced. Bishop Valtorta placed a number of nuns and a priest at the government's disposal as volunteers. He set up a coordinating committee and visited the overcrowded hospitals daily. Gradually, by the middle of 1941, the population of Hong Kong had risen to 1,640,000. The bishop urged his Chinese faithful to provide help to their compatriots in Mainland China. Thousands of dollars were given to the Chinese Red Cross and sent to the city of Nanjing, the victim of a brutal massacre at the hands of the Japanese. Bishop Valtorta also organized an expedition to Guangzhou to deliver food and medicine via a passenger ship rented for the occasion. He appealed, unsuccessfully, to the Chinese and Japanese authorities to create a demilitarized zone near Hong Kong to facilitate humanitarian efforts. The Chinese government acknowledged Bishop Valtorta's charitable work in the districts by conferring on him the Jade Medal.



Enemies of the Chinese

During World War II, the Axis pact between Italy and Japan put the Italian missionaries in a very delicate position. Bishop Valtorta called upon the Italian missionaries on March 12, 1938 to preach to all the duty to love their country and to help indiscriminately all the victims and wounded of the war. Bishop Valtorta instructed the missionaries not to show any political partisanship for their home country. On the contrary, they were expected to understand the aversion that the Chinese Catholics felt towards Italy, whose weapons and apparatus the Japanese were using against China.

Enemies of the English

On the day Italy declared war on Great Britain on June 10, 1940, the governor of Hong Kong summoned the bishop to his office to express his embarrassment at having to curtail the number of Italian priests allowed to work in the colony. Besides the priests working in the bishop's house, only a single Italian priest could be left in each parish, provided that they would report in person to the local police station and submit their mail to official censure. All Italian nuns, however, could continue their service as before. Subsequently, a movement restriction order was issued for all those of Italian and German nationality. To enforce the order, guards were placed at their houses and institutions.

All Italian priests not assigned to specific parishes had to leave the colony. Thus, Frs. Giovanni Pittavino, Umberto Galbiati, Domenico Bazzo and Ottavio Liberatore left for Macao where they remained until July 1944. Frs. Diego D'Ayala, Alessandro Cometti and Luigi Pulit, followed later by Fr. Giorgio Caruso, chose to help their confreres working in the Mainland China districts.



Bishop Enrico Valtorta visiting Mainland districts.

The Japanese attack

The Japanese attack on the Hong Kong colony began on December 8, 1941, at 8:00 am. On the same day, the chief of police sent an interning order to the bishop for the detention of 15 Italian priests for the sake of their own protection. They were taken to Stanley Prison.

Left alone with his Chinese priests and Fr. Antonio Rossellò, a PIME of Spaniard extraction, the bishop asked the Irish Jesuits for help.

The Japanese spread death and destruction everywhere. Bombs hit the Cathedral. St. Joseph's Church sustained considerable damage, while Canossa Hospital, hit by bombs, was in flames and eventually totally destroyed. Almost all buildings in the colony sustained some damage. People, mostly women and children, took shelter in Churches and religious institutions. People crowded into every available corner, cooked rice on clay barbecue stoves and slept on the floor. The Cathedral, the bishop's house and convents became shelters. The clergy, nuns and seminarians were busy helping out those in need and distributing food. Among the local Catholics, the Portuguese suffered the most because many of them had volunteered to pick up arms against the invaders. The day after the surrender, on December 26, the Italian priests were freed by the new Japanese occupants but detained in a hotel in Wan Chai.

The occupation

Bishop Valtorta, as "senior member of the Italian community, acting in lieu of the Italian consul, in his official capacity as Hong Kong Apostolic Vicar and representative of the Head of the Vatican State", had an audience with the commander-in-chief of the Japanese forces. He asked the commander to allow the Italian priests to return to their parishes. He also asked for protection of the Church's properties because they should be considered technically under the Supreme Pontiff's jurisdiction.

The Hong Kong Church underwent a most painful reversal of fate: while the Italians were freed, about 60 nuns and priests of "hostile nationalities" were interned on January 5, 1942 in concentration camps, especially at Stanley. Eventually, in a prisoners' exchange, most of them were freed and returned to their countries of origin. Frs. Bernard Meyer and Don Hessler, Maryknoll American

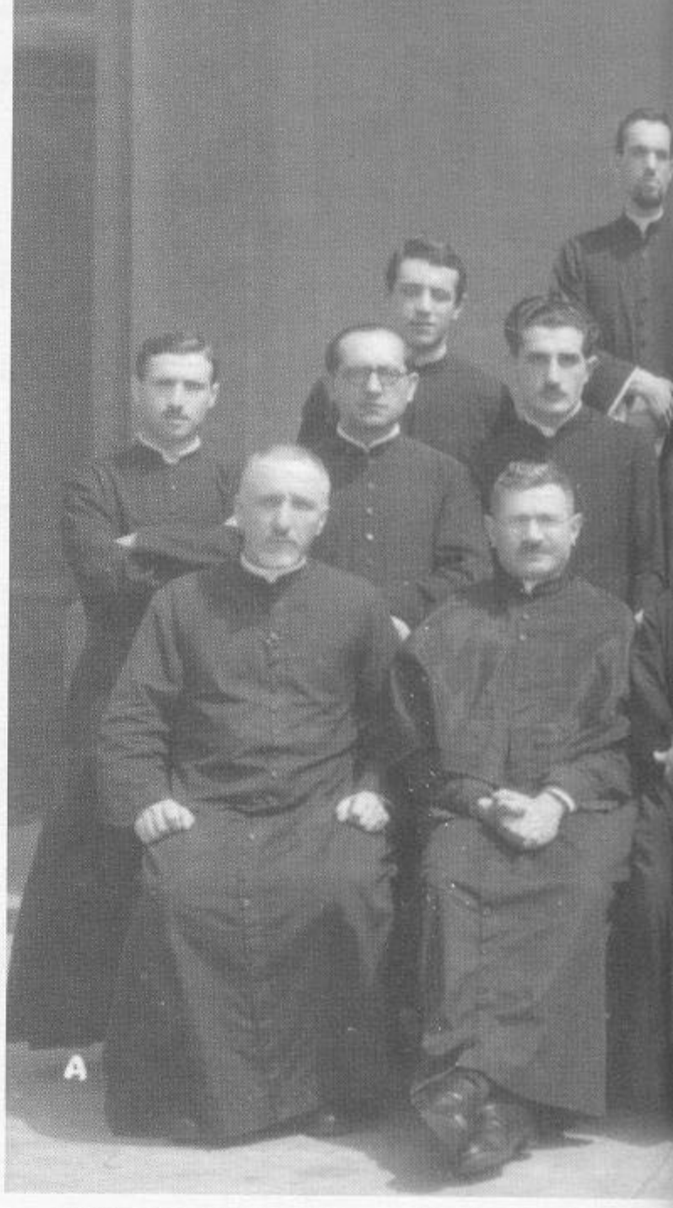
missionaries, decided to stay behind to assist other internees. Bishop Valtorta managed to send care packages to the internees; and, towards the end of the war, he was able to visit them in person.

But even the Italian priests were not truly free. They had to abide by a strict set of rules for which the bishop himself was to account. Bishop Valtorta had to turn in detailed reports, specifying the nature of the Catholic Church, listing the assignments given to foreign and Chinese diocesan personnel. He also had to inform the authorities about the nature of male and female congregations operating in Hong Kong, their activities and the ways each was supporting itself financially.

From January to April 1942, 600,000 people, including many Catholics, left Hong Kong. About 2,500 Portuguese Catholics found shelter in Macao. The Catholic population dropped from 21,500 to 4,000. Those who could not emigrate risked dying of starvation. About 300 to 500 corpses were picked up daily off the streets. By the end of the occupation, the population lost about a third of its pre-war level of 1,500,000 people. Bishop Valtorta wrote:

> *Famished people die in the streets; there might even be some cases of cannibalism. There is no way to help. We try to organize some rescue committees in the parishes, but our resources are so limited. Yet, somehow, we hope to help as many families as possible to overcome these unspeakable hardships.*

Bishop Valtorta tried to keep a good relationship with the Japanese authorities so that he could still receive financial help for his exhausted people from the Holy See's Papal Fund. He helped all as best he could. To meet the dire predicament of the people, Bishop Valtorta sold some of the Church's property: three houses, his pectoral golden chain and ring, as well as those of his predecessors. He went as far as selling any liturgical vessels made of gold and even the Church bells. He claimed Vatican prerogatives so that he could oppose, to the best of his abilities, often unsuccessfully, the Japanese seizure of property belonging to religious orders. He requested from the Japanese authorities, mostly unsuccessfully, compensation for damages, seizures and use of mission property. Bishop Valtorta helped all: Europeans and Chinese, Catholics and Protestants, war prisoners, refugees on Mainland China, orphanages and clinics.





Enemies of the Japanese

In September 1943, when Italy signed the armistice with the Allies, the situation for Italian citizens in Hong Kong became, once again, critical. Overnight, the Italian missionaries in Hong Kong became enemies of the occupants. Yet, incredible



PIME missionaries with Bishop Enrico Valtorta and the famous Canadian preacher Fr. Mateo Crawley-Boevey, SS.CC., the apostle of the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart. Fr. Crawley-Boevey came to Hong Kong in 1936.

as it might seem, Italian priests and nuns were not interned and were allowed to continue their pastoral ministry. There is but one plausible explanation for this unusual situation under such a ferocious occupation: the influence exercised by the bishop. It was possible only through his skills of persuasion and the high esteem in which even the occupying forces held him.

In October 1943, the Allies began their air-sorties to retake control of Hong Kong. The first bombardments had a most tragic effect: they hit the very densely populated area of Wan Chai causing the death of 10,000 people.

The bombing continued around the clock. Meanwhile, the Japanese, sensing approaching defeat, became even more arrogant and irritable. Finally they surrendered on August 15, 1945.

A difficult rebirth

Post-war Hong Kong was a pitiful sight. Its population was reduced to about 500,000 people, of which 80 percent suffered from malnutrition. More than half of the buildings in the city were uninhabitable and society was in chaos. A few months after the war, the population doubled as the refugees returned from China. The flux changed the city's makeup. The population had risen to 1,800,000 by 1947. While the Mainland descended into unrest and chaos, Hong Kong began to progress at a blazing pace, developing into one of Southeast Asia's major cities.

The Holy See established the ecclesiastical hierarchy for all of China on April 11, 1946; and its delegation was elevated to the rank of Apostolic Internunciature with Bishop Antonio Riberi at its head. Hong Kong's apostolic vicariate was officially elevated into a diocese and Bishop Enrico Valtorta became the first diocesan bishop of Hong Kong. In the meantime, Bishop Valtorta, exhausted by the long war years, left the city between June 12, 1946 and September 7, 1947. He spent time in the United States and Italy taking care of his health, raising funds and finding workers from other religious congregations.

Before Japan's surrender, Bishop Valtorta had prepared a "Draft of ideas" for the mission's post-war time. It was a concrete plan for the reconstruction and reorganization of the mission's central organizations and personnel. In the draft, Bishop Valtorta wrote:

> *Can we, PIME missionaries, hope to provide the finances and the necessary personnel, all alone?*

Aware of his weak physical condition and of the vastness of the tasks on hand, he pointed out to the Holy See the need for a coadjutor bishop. The Holy See chose Fr. Lorenzo Bianchi who was consecrated bishop on October 9, 1949.

Father of the poor

The 25th anniversary of Bishop Valtorta's Episcopal ordination on June 13, 1951, was such a grandiose celebration that both Catholic and Protestant newspapers described it as "stately". It was a fitting show of gratitude from a city that had greatly benefited from his hands-on intervention. All people, rich and poor, Catholics and non-Catholics hemmed around him during the liturgical ceremonies and public receptions. His love for the poor was rewarded with sizable donations for the refugees. One such donation came from the Holy Father. Fr. Antonio Riganti, the Vicar General, wrote:

> *On this occasion it became evident in what high esteem Bishop Valtorta was held by both those of society's upper echelons and by those of low status. All recalled what he had done during the Japanese occupation and in the immediate post-bellum to alleviate the sufferings of all those who sought help from him... Even though he had only recently left hospital, our bishop wasn't bothered by those demanding engagements. He was moved by so many displays of affection and particularly grateful for the large sum of money collected as a charity fund. It would enable him to finance various works of care for the needy.*

Bishop Valtorta died few months later, on September 3, 1951. His funeral was a celebration of his greatness. The procession to the cemetery saw the participation of the colony's highest authorities, all the clergy and religious personnel as well as an impressive throng of the general public.



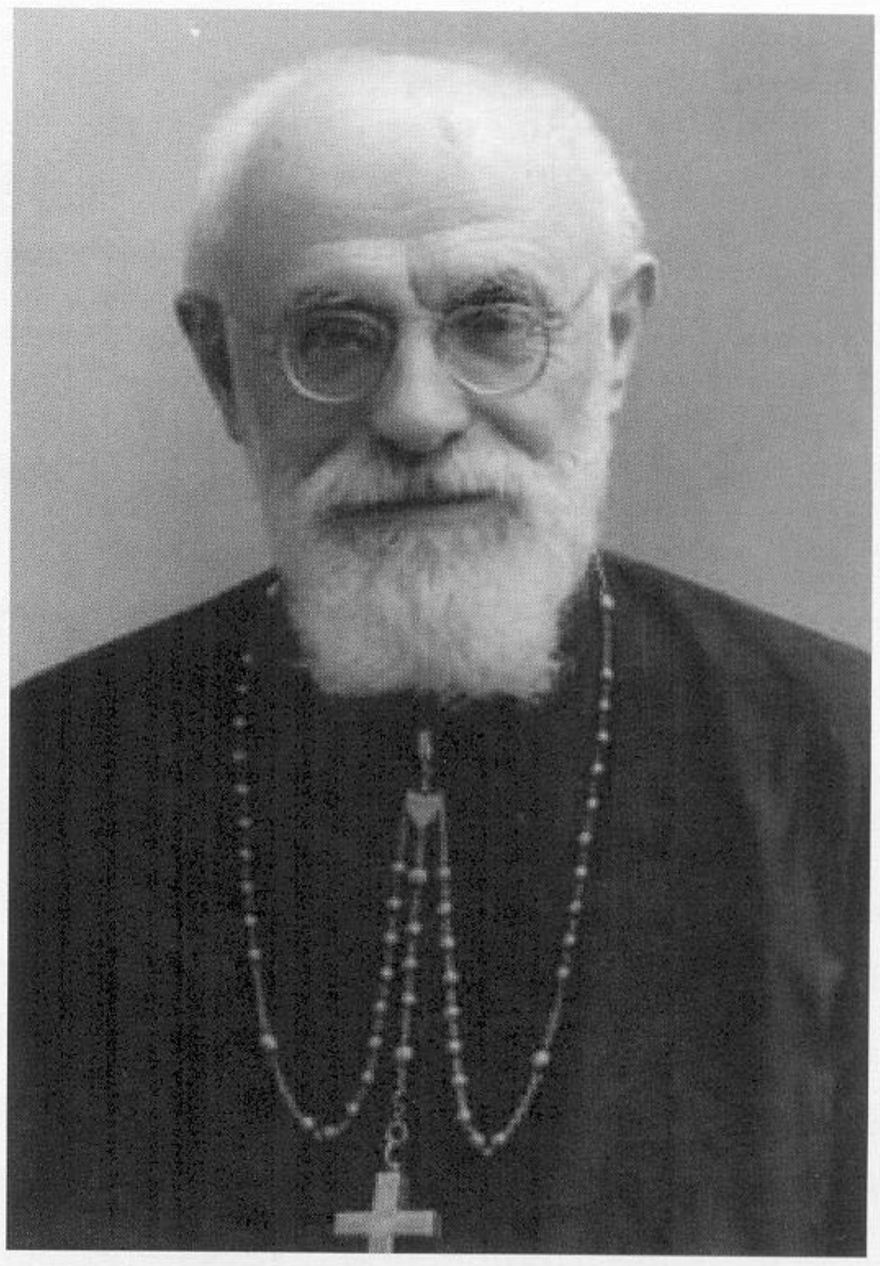
Enrico Valtorta was born at Carate Brianza (Milan), on May 14, 1883. He was ordained priest in March 1907 and appointed to Hong Kong a few months later. He had worked in all districts of the vicariate, when he was elected Vicar Apostolic of Hong Kong in 1926.

Bishop Valtorta was a man of great views and accomplishments. His 25 years as bishop saw admirable progress for the mission. Hong Kong's rapid development as a trade center, especially after World War II, required adequate measures to be taken also in the field of faith. Bishop Valtorta reacted to that challenge by calling to Hong Kong numerous orders and congregations of both genders. Under his leadership were erected the Regional Seminary, the 'Catholic Truth Society' publishing company, numerous scholastic and charitable institutions and also welfare centers. Thus, he had truly prepared the diocese of Hong Kong for other difficult challenges ahead. Bishop Bianchi wrote:

> *Starting with the English governor, all civil authorities considered him an exceptional man. Each and every one of his petitions was accepted. He struck a figure both lofty and lowly at the same time. Because of him, the Catholic Church in Hong Kong was held in high esteem across the social and religious strata as if Catholicism were the faith of most of the people. This happened in spite of the fact that Catholicism was a miniscule minority in an English colony whose official religion was Anglican!*

Fr. Ovidio Calzini added:

> *He was a man with most refined diplomatic tact. Not only could our bishop avoid hurting national sensitivities, not only could he sway the most rigid inclinations to his will, but, and this is most remarkable, he could captivate the most sincere admiration and esteem of all. His humility was heartfelt and deep. His temperament was naturally energetic and rather impetuous; yet, confronted by displays of lack of respect and outright insults, he would not have the reaction everyone expected. He would accept the insults and lack of respect with silence and poise. Furthermore, he did not hold a grudge. His status and his talents never went to his head. Praises seemed to leave him unaffected. He had a heart of gold, which he hid under his habitually tough skin. I am saying "habitually" because with children and the poor, he would show his heart without a trace of roughness. With the poor and those who suffered, he acted as a genuine father.*



A portrait of Bishop Enrico Valtorta, who worked hard to minimize the hardships of Hong Kong people during Japanese occupation.

The Sacrifice of a Courageous Missionary

Fr. Emilio Teruzzi

The violent death of Father Emilio Teruzzi, at the age of 55, came as a great shock for all Catholics, because he was one of the leading figures among the priests of the vicariate. Fr. Teruzzi had been in Hong Kong for 30 years, spending the first 15 in the Sai Kung area (1912-1927). People came to regard him as their "Father". He was their intercessor with the government authorities, with the police and the bandits who were terrorizing the area. On one occasion, after a gang had kidnapped some Christians, Fr. Teruzzi set out alone to look for them. He did not stop until he stood face to face with the chief bandit and petitioned him directly for the release of the hostages. He gained their freedom and, to a degree, the respect of the chief, who eventually left Fr. Teruzzi's people alone.



Fr. Emilio Teruzzi.

During the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong (December 1941 – August 1945), the situation in Sai Kung became chaotic and dangerous. Unscrupulous thieves and bandits, as well as communist guerillas took advantage of the lack of law and order in the area.

In 1942, only two Chinese priests were working in the area, Fr. Renatus Kwok in Sai Kung and Fr. Francis Wong in Tai Long. It took great courage to traveling from a village to the other. According to witnesses, one evening in the middle of August, Fr. Kwok, 31, was tied up by an unknown group and taken away in a boat together with about eight Christians. They were never heard from again.

As soon as Fr. Teruzzi received the sad news, he volunteered to take Fr. Kwok's post, saying that he was the most suitable for Sai Kung; but Bishop Enrico Valtorta did not agree. Only after repeated requests from Fr. Teruzzi the bishop finally did allow him to visit the place but only for a period of two weeks. On October 5 1942, Fr. Teruzzi reached Sai Kung and started meeting people and administering the Sacraments. Despite the dangerous circumstances, Fr. Teruzzi wrote that he felt safe. Once back in Hong Kong, he asked the bishop again to officially appoint him as the caretaker of the district. At last the bishop agreed. On November 16, Fr. Teruzzi returned to Sai Kung. As well as serving the Sai Kung communities, he planned visits to other villages in the area, which had been left without a priest for sometime. On November 25, he left for the

"14 Villages" area, together with a catechist and a servant, planning to return within two days. But they never made it back.

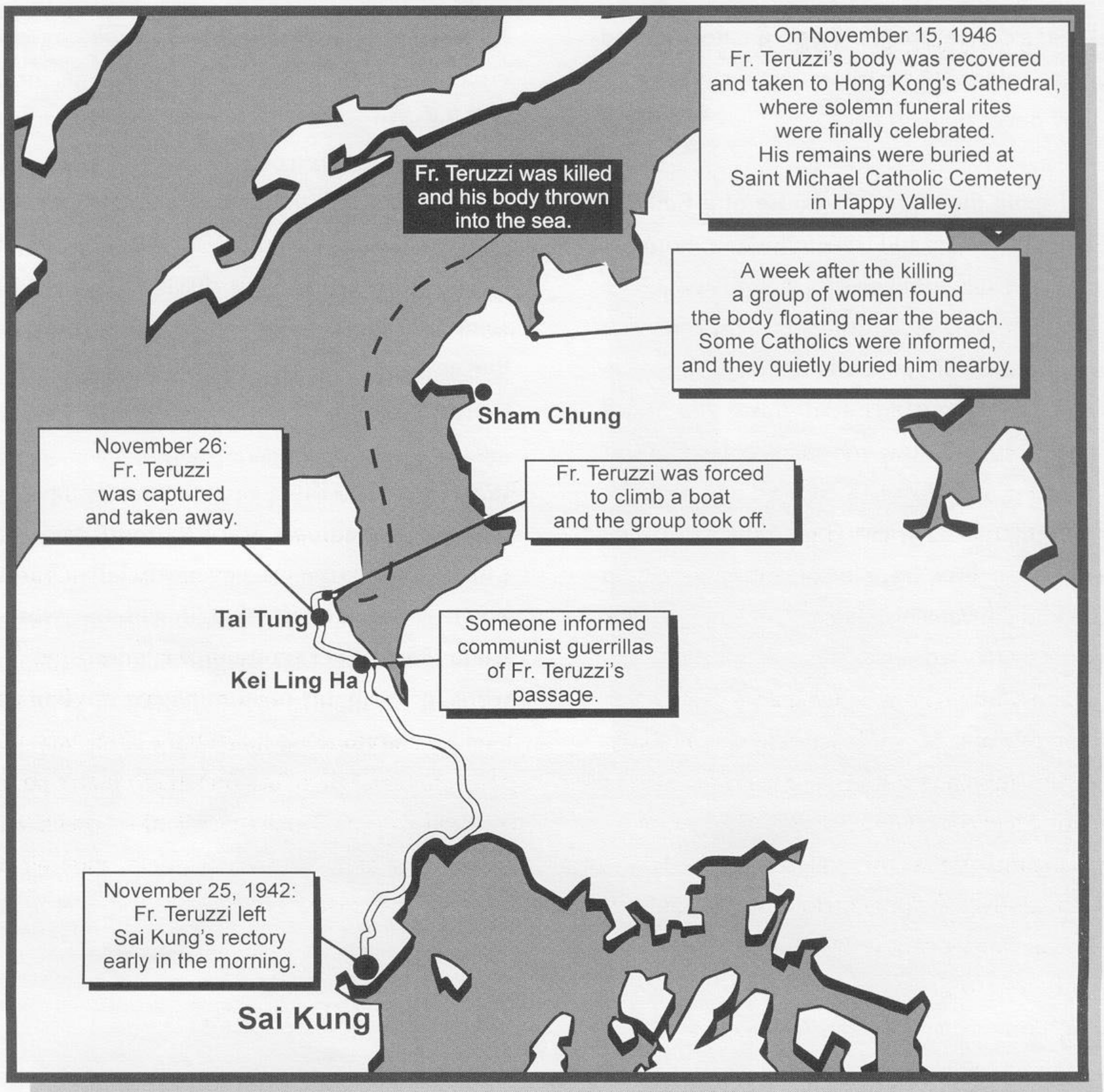
He had spent the night in a house of a Catholic family in Tai Tung; and, the following morning, while getting ready to celebrate the Eucharist, he was kidnapped by an armed gang, who took him to the coast, put him on a boat and sailed away. A week later the corpse of Fr. Teruzzi was discovered floating in the shallow waters of a beach near Sham Chung, with his skull crushed and his body bound with ropes. Some Catholics from Sham Chung buried him on a nearby dry slope. No news about the catechist and the servant was ever received, which led all to believe that they had also been killed.

Meanwhile, Fr. Wong, 48, had courageously continued with his apostolate and visits around Tai Long. This was despite the fact that Communist guerrillas had taken over his chapel in Chek Keng and turned it into their headquarters. A few days after Fr. Teruzzi's capture, Fr. Wong was called to Chek King and he, too, disappeared. For quite sometime, nothing was heard about him, then the news that he had been murdered reached the community.

Who were the killers and what motivated them to get rid of three Catholic priests and other Christians? No one was ever officially charged; but it seems certain that it was the work of some East River communist guerrillas who were in the habit of eliminating anyone they



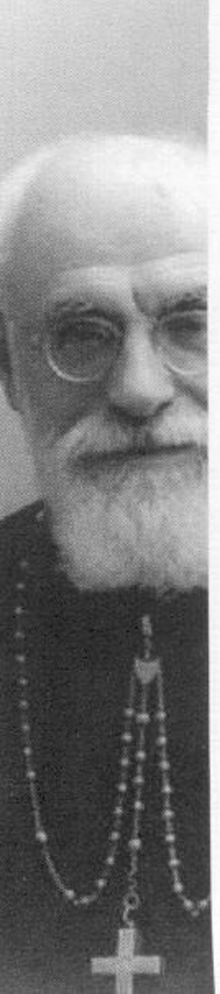
Fr. Emilio Teruzzi has worked in Sai Kung from 1915 to 1927, and he returned there in 1942. Here he is portrayed at the right of Bishop Pozzoni. The picture was probably taken around Christmas 1923, when Bishop Domenico Pozzoni made his last pastoral visit. Also recognizable are Fr. Riccardo Brookes (at Bishop's left) and Fr. Giacomo Zilioli.



Map showing where Fr. Emilio Teruzzi spent his last hours (November 1942).

suspected of collaboration with the Japanese. Fr. Quirino De Ascaniis, who served in the Sai Kung district from 1953 to 1961, made a lot of reliable inquiries about the murders of the three Catholic priests. He stated that, beyond any doubt, the murders were indeed committed by communist guerrillas who hated the Catholic Church.

On November 15, 1946, Fr. Teruzzi's remains were brought from Sai Kung to St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery at Happy Valley. The remains of Fr. Kwok and Fr. Wong were never found.



Fr. Emilio Teruzzi was born in 1887 in Lesmo, Milan, Italy. He was ordained a priest in 1912 and then left immediately for Hong Kong. After working in Sai Kung for 15 years, in 1927 he was called to work in the Diocesan Curia, as Chancellor, Archivist, Prison Chaplain, and was given other pastoral assignments as well. He was also Chaplain of the Catholic Boy Scouts. As part of his work as archivist, he wrote, in Italian, a "Short History of the Hong Kong Vicariate."