 Reading time: 7 min.

Arrival in Patagones and start of the work

The first Salesians finally established their mission in Patagonia on 20 January 1880. Accompanied by Monsignor Antonio Espinosa, vicar of Archbishop Federico Aneyros, Fr Giuseppe Fagnano, Fr Emilio Rizzo, Fr Luigi Chiaria, catechist Bro. Luciani and another “young pupil of theirs”, who has remained unknown, arrived in Carmen de Patagones; with them were also four Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: Giovanna Borgo, Angela Vallese, Angiolina Cassolo and Laura Rodriguez.

The missionaries committed themselves to the catechesis and formation of the inhabitants of Patagones and Viedma by opening a college dedicated to St Joseph, while the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians founded an institute dedicated to Santa Maria de Las Indias. Expeditions were then launched to the colonies along the Rio Negro, with the aim of guaranteeing spiritual and catechetical support to the emigrants living in those regions and, at the same time, to systematically start catechesis for the conversion of the native communities of Patagonia.

The presence of the Salesians in Argentina was favoured and followed with interest by the Argentine government, which was obviously not driven in this choice by a fervent desire to see the indigenous communities converted to Christianity, but by the need to calm public opinion outraged by the indiscriminate killings and the sale of prisoners: the military campaigns of 1879 to expand the borders had clashed with the resistance of the communities living in the territories of the Pampas and Patagonia.

Habits and customs of the indigenous communities of Patagonia

Getting to know the customs, culture and beliefs of the communities they intended to convert was an important task for the first missionaries: Fr Giacomo Costamagna, during his exploratory mission to Patagones in 1879, noted that, once he had crossed the Rio Colorado, he had come across a tree “laden with drapes, or better put, rags, which the Indians had hung as votive offerings.” The missionary explained that the tree was not considered a deity, but simply the abode “of the gods or good spirits” and that the rags were supposed to be a kind of offering to appease them and make them benevolent. Costamagna later discovered that communities worshipped a “supreme God” called Gùnechen.

Knowledge increased over the years. With time, the missionaries realised that the communities in Patagonia believed in a “Supreme Being” who administered

and ruled the universe and that their concept of a benevolent deity, however – when compared to the Christian one – appeared confused, as it was often not possible to “distinguish the principle of good, which is God, from the evil genius, which is the devil”. The members of the community only feared “the influences of the evil mind”, so that in the end the Indians only implored the evil deity to refrain from all evil.

The missionaries sadly noted that the indigenous communities “know nothing to ask the Lord about spiritual things” and also described how the illness and death of a community member was dealt with. According to the common belief, the demon, called Gualicho, took possession of the sick and, in the case of the death of the sick person, the demon “had won”: “and so they weep, pray and sing lamentations accompanied by a thousand exorcisms, with which they pretend to obtain that the evil genius leave the deceased in peace.”

Once the corpse was buried, the period of mourning began, which usually lasted six days in which the Indians “threw themselves with their faces to the ground” and sang “a kind of lamentation”; living where the deceased had resided and coming into contact with any of his personal effects was strongly discouraged, because Gualicho had lived there.

There were no shared cemeteries and above the graves it was possible to see “either two or three skeletons of horses’”, which were sacrificed to the deceased to be of help and support to him in the afterlife. The horses were thus killed above the grave, leaving the corpses there so that the dead could enjoy their flesh, while the saddle, various supplies and jewellery were buried with the corpse.

In ordinary life, only the richest had square, mud-brick dwellings, with nothing “but the door to enter them, and an opening in the middle of the roof for light and for the smoke to go out”, while the communities along the Rio Negro were established by rivers or lagoons and the dwellings were mostly simple tents: “horse or guanaco leather suspended above with a few sticks fixed in the ground”. For those who had surrendered, the Argentine government had ordered them to build themselves “a more or less large room usually made of wolfsbane, plants with which the field abounds in damp places”. The most fortunate had built houses with willow poles and mortar.

In 1883, the missionaries noted: “Nowadays, and especially in the bad season, it is rare to see an Indian not dressed from head to toe, even among those who have not yet surrendered. The men dress more or less like ours, minus the cleanliness, which they do not have, and the trousers they wear ordinarily like the Garci, in the manner, as they say, of Ciripà. The poorest, if they have nothing else, wrap themselves in a kind of mantle of the most ordinary cloth. The women wear

the manta, and it is a surcoat, which covers the whole body." The women remained faithful to the traditional costumes for longer: "the women have the ambition to wear large silver earrings, several rings on their fingers, and a kind of bracelet on their wrists, made of silver filigree with several loops around the arm. Some of them and the more affluent also wear several turns of filigree over their chests. They are by nature very shy, and when any unknown stranger approaches their home, they hastily hide."

Marriages followed tradition: the groom would give his future wife's parents "various precious objects in gold and silver, such as rings, bracelets, stirrups, brakes and the like", or he could simply pay "a sum of money agreed between them": fathers would only give their daughters in marriage for money, and what is more, the groom was obliged to stay at the bride's home and provide for the maintenance of the entire family.

Polygamy was widespread among the chiefs or caciques and consequently, as Fr Costamagna stated in a letter published in January 1880, it was difficult to convince them to renounce it in order to become Christians.

Evangelising the native communities: "you will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but with gentleness and love".

A fundamental role in the work of catechesis and evangelisation in Patagonia was played by Fr Domenico Milanesio, also for his work as mediator between the communities and the Argentine government.

The missionary joined the confreres on 8 November 1880 after being appointed vicar of the parish of Our Lady of Mercede in Viedma, and in a letter to Fr Michele Rua dated 28 March 1881 he recounted his first mission among "the Indians in the area", underlining the considerable difficulties encountered in the attempt to instruct and catechise: the native communities lived far from each other and Fr Domenico had to go in person to their *toldos*, or homes. Sometimes he managed to gather several families together and then catechesis was held outside where, sitting on the lawns, the Patagonians listened to the catechism lesson.

Fr Domenico recounted that even a simple prayer such as "My Jesus, mercy", which he considered simple and easy to memorise, actually took a long time to understand: although it was repeated between fifty and a hundred times, it was often forgotten within a couple of days. However, the desire to see the native communities converted and sincerely Christian was more than sufficient motivation to continue the mission: "But our Religion commands us to love them as our brothers, as children of the Heavenly Father, as souls redeemed by the Blood of Jesus Christ; and therefore with patient, loving charity that hopes everything, we

say, we repeat things one day, two, ten, twenty until it is enough, and finally we succeed in making them learn the necessary things. If you could only see how happy they are afterwards; it is a real consolation for them and for us, which rewards us for everything."

It was not easy to get these communities to accept the truths of the Catholic faith: Fr Domenico, in a report published in the Bulletin in November 1883, recounted that during a mission to the community of the cacique (chief) Willamay, near Norquin, he seriously risked his life when the assembly to which he was preaching began to discuss the teachings he had received up to that point. Willamay himself, describing Milanesio as "a dream teller in the manner of old women", withdrew to his *toldo*, while there were those who sided with the missionary and those who were of the same opinion as the cacique. Faced with this situation, Milanesio preferred to remain aloof and as he himself noted, "I then stood silently waiting for the outcome of that agitation of minds, which was a harbinger of more sinister things. At a certain point, I truly believed that the time had come for me to at least take a beating from those barbarians, and perhaps even leave my own skin among them." Fortunately, the party that supported the missionary prevailed in the end, so the Salesian was able to conclude his catechesis to the thanks of the community.

Catechising these populations was not an easy task and the Salesians were hindered by the Argentine military, whose attitudes and habits offered negative examples of Christian living.

Fr Fagnano recorded: "The conversion of the Indians is not so easy to obtain when they are obliged to live with certain soldiers who do not give them a good example of morality; and it is not possible to enter their *toldos* for the moment without risk to one's life, because these savages use all means to take revenge against the Christians who, according to them, have come to take possession of their fields and their livestock." The same Salesian also wrote of two communities who, having settled a short distance from an Argentine camp where "liquor shops" had been opened, indulged "in the vice of drunkenness". Fr Fagnano reproached the military who, "for cowardly gain", laid the groundwork to make the Indians even more likely to indulge in "bestial disorder".

Fr Fagnano and Fr Milanesio continued, however, to approach, catechise and form these communities, to "instruct them in the truths of the Gospel, educate them by word, but more by good example", despite the risks, so that, as Don Bosco wished, they could become "good Christians and upright citizens."

Giacomo Bosco