 Reading time: 7 min.

On 22 May 2026, Pope Leo XIV authorised the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints to publish the decree of Venerability recognising the heroic virtues of Fr. Costantino Vendrame, a missionary who brought the smile of Don Bosco to the peaks of Assam. Fr. Costantino lived the Gospel in an extraordinary way, embodying Don Bosco's preventive system in distant lands, and the Church points to him as a sure model of Christian life to imitate.

A vocation born among the Treviso hills

He was born on 27 August 1893, in San Martino di Colle Umberto (Treviso), into a poor family but rich in faith, in a domestic hearth that was his *first seminary*. In that dignified and industrious poverty, marked early by bereavement and infirmity, Costantino learned the grammar of sacrifice. He lived in a family and parish environment where sacrifice was daily bread and faith the light of the journey. This humility of his origins forged in him that trait of genuine Salesianity: the ability to be among people with simplicity and love. Costantino felt the call to the priesthood early on. After his first steps in the diocesan seminary of Ceneda, his burning desire for the missions and to give himself totally to the Lord pushed him, in 1912, towards the Salesians of Don Bosco. His formation was not only academic, but was forged through the practical training of religious life, combined with the trial by fire of the First World War. In those years of conflict, he did not suspend his search for God, but was an exemplary soldier, demonstrating that fidelity to one's vocation can shine even among the barbed wire of the trenches, as transpires from this letter written to his sister Angela, with whom he shared his missionary passion: "Inflamed, since my earliest years by the idea of the Christian apostolate pushed to its strongest and purest expression, without ever having been able to give free rein to this sacred flame, without having yet been able to freely release this accumulation of energies that I feel multiplying within me ever more, I feel immense relief in finding souls to whom I can reveal my whole soul without fear of being misunderstood and perhaps even mocked. You are precisely one of these souls because in your dear letters you show that you deeply penetrate the meaning of divine things and know how to taste how good the Lord is with souls who give themselves entirely to Him… Oh, if only I could have you as a companion in this

apostolate whenever the Lord deems me worthy! Let us therefore prepare ourselves with prayer, my good sister, and let us invoke from God for many other souls this new spirit of apostolate because modern society needs apostolic men to regenerate itself and rise to new life." This constancy prefigured the heroic nature of his future ministry. Costantino did not lose the compass of his vocation: ordained a priest on 15 March 1924 in Milan, he received the missionary crucifix on 5 October of that year in Turin, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, as the seal of his apostolic mandate. He was ready for his promised land: India.

Apostolic missionary in North-East India

Arriving in Shillong on 24 December 1924, Fr. Vendrame inaugurated an apostolic action that would become legendary. He did not limit himself to managing structures, but elevated the office of parish priest, which he held almost uninterruptedly in Shillong-Laitumkhrah and Shillong-Mawkhar, to a dimension of total apostolic itinerancy. His method was *personal contact*. He walked immense distances, making himself *poor among the poor*, to bring the consolation of God into every hut. He chose to live the wear and tear of hardships and the dangers of apostolic life with a smile, making himself credible in the eyes of the least because he shared their very precariousness. His obedience also took him to Wandiwash, in Tamil Nadu (South India), demonstrating a universal availability that overcame linguistic and cultural boundaries. Wherever he went, his charity became an instrument of natural interreligious dialogue. His figure was esteemed not only by Christians, but also by men of other religious faiths, who considered him a true man of God, capable of listening and profound respect. With his charity he attracted thousands of souls to Christ, evangelising village by village, hut by hut. Mgr. Stefano Ferrando, today a Venerable Servant of God, thus outlined the human and spiritual profile of Fr. Costantino, always reaching out to the whole of the Kingdom and the souls to be saved: "Fr. Vendrame, upon his arrival in Assam, was assigned to the novitiate to study the languages and acclimatise. After 10 days, he threw the grammars to the wind and went to learn the Khasi language in the villages, in the working-class districts of the city, swarming with flocks of children. With a smiling face he went to them, winning them over through the ways of the heart. A true daily oratory began. It seemed that Don Bosco's vision was coming true. In distant and dangerous regions, where so many attempts had failed, Don Bosco had seen hosts of young people running joyfully to meet his Salesians, exclaiming: 'We have waited for you for so long'. It was a sight never seen in Shillong. In the streets they no

longer murmured with contempt: ki roman (the Catholics). The children now ran to meet Fr. Vendrame shouting: Khublei, Phadar (Good morning, Father), and with joy they took his hand, clung to his habit and accompanied him. On the doorstep the mothers watched and smiled. Fr. Vendrame did not wait for the pagans to come to him. After preaching *on the rooftops*, he went looking for them to instruct them in their homes. Such work was only possible in the evening and at night, when the family gathers after the daily work. The fire is lit in the middle of the room. Fr. Vendrame sits on a stool a few centimetres high. Everyone else is also squatting around the fire. The smoke stings the eyes. Fr. Vendrame speaks of the kingdom of God, of Jesus, and is listened to with reverence, because no one has ever spoken to them in that way. And he goes from hut to hut and returns home late at night, walking in the dark and deserted streets with a small stick and the rosary in his hand, praying with the catechist".

The trial of the conflict

The outbreak of the Second World War transformed Fr. Vendrame into an *enemy alien* in the eyes of the British Empire. His freedom of movement was drastically cut short by imprisonment. Interned first under the surveillance of the Gurkhas, he was later transferred to the camps of Deoli and Dehra Dun. Yet this forced immobility was not a sterile parenthesis; on the contrary, this period represents a pinnacle of pastoral charity: deprived of the possibility of walking towards the people, Don Vendrame became the centre of radiation of hope among his fellow prisoners. In those places of suffering he demonstrated that the mission does not reside in the legs of the missionary, but in his burning heart, capable of consoling and supporting even in the darkness of confinement. His spiritual strength transformed the concentration camp into a *parish of the spirit*; he became a beacon of consolation for his companions in misfortune. A Carmelite missionary bishop, who was his fellow prisoner during the war, was able to write of him: "Among the missionaries I have known, Fr. Vendrame is a giant. If a man manages to become a 100% missionary, he will be another Fr. Vendrame. Since then, since we met him, we have only to keep in our hearts the trace – because Fr. Vendrame did not leave a memory only in those he met – of this apostle of the Lord, always an apostle, he was no less so in the concentration camp, a great apostle, unsurpassed among the Khasi, unapproachable in South India, but above all a great apostle."

The last mission: the chair of suffering and death

Fr. Vendrame's last years were an ascent to Calvary. Struck by deforming spinal arthrosis and tried by excruciating pain that led him to the point of fainting, he transformed his bed of pain in Dibrugarh into the last, supreme chair of teaching. His was not a sudden agony, but a conscious participation in the passion of Christ, lived in total oblation. He died on 30 January 1957, on the eve of the feast of Saint John Bosco. This temporal coincidence is not just a chronological detail, but a charismatic seal. Fr. Vendrame's life ended in the heart of the Salesian charism, like a son returning to the Father on the day dedicated to his Founder. The funeral was an explosion of fame of holiness and signs, during which the people of God compared him to the giants of the Church: to Saint Francis Xavier for his tireless drive towards the extreme peripheries of Asia and his evangelising ardour; to Saint Paul for the vastness of his apostolic vision and for having become all things to all men in North-East India; to Saint Vincent de Paul for his predilection for the poorest and his ability to see Christ in the suffering.

Missionary of Hope

The proclamation of the Venerability of Fr. Costantino Vendrame is a gift that unites the hills of San Martino di Colle Umberto and Vittorio Veneto to the peaks of Assam and the Archdiocese of Shillong. His figure becomes a model for today's mission, especially in dialogue with cultures and religions. Don Vendrame teaches that Salesian holiness is fulfilled in the everyday nature of presence and in the total gift of self. He remains the apostle with a burning heart, capable of radiating the joy of the Gospel even through the mystery of pain. A priest who loved with the heart of Christ: warm and human, strong and faithful, ready to give his life until his last breath. At the centre of his proclamation there were no theories, but the Heart of Christ, that living core that he felt beating for every creature. This is how Mgr. Oreste Marengo, a missionary bishop and also a Servant of God, who knew Fr. Costantino well, remembered him: "For me he was a Salesian who, like Don Bosco, always thought, spoke and judged in terms of souls to be saved, one who never thought of himself. If he made a mistake, it was that of neglecting himself too much because he saw nothing but the need of souls: food and rest were the last things he thought about". The hardships and privations he took upon himself during his apostolic tours are a secret known only to God. He never spoke of them, what is known is only what has been reported to us by the people to whom he adapted

himself in every way. Just as he did not care for himself, so he never in the least sought himself in his work. Only from the Sacred Heart of Jesus did he draw his thirst for souls. His austerity was only surpassed by his compassion for the poor.

The recognition of his heroic virtues confirms that his history of great missionary action continues to inspire the Salesian Family, the Church of Vittorio Veneto and the whole world, pointing to the Sacred Heart of Jesus as the inexhaustible source of every mission. His holiness is characterised by an unconditional docility to the Holy Spirit and by a Marian devotion that sustained his every step. His life teaches that holiness is not a goal for a few, but a journey of consolation and love that, starting from the heart of God, can embrace and transform the entire world.