

□ Reading time: 16 min.

St Luigi VERSIGLIA, sdb (1873-1930)

Don Bosco's charism, centred on an educational fatherhood imbued with apostolic passion, has not only produced priests and missionaries, but also pastors of the Church who have lived the episcopate as an extension of the Salesian 'Da mihi animas' (Give me souls). This summary retraces the luminous witness of nine bishops - from the protomartyr St. Luigi Versiglia to Cardinal Augusto Hlond - whose causes for canonisation attest to their reputation for holiness. In their ministry, often exercised on missionary frontiers or in times of persecution, their filial trust in Mary Help of Christians, their care for the poor, their zeal for catechesis, and their willingness to sacrifice even their lives shine forth. Their stories show how Salesian spirituality can flourish in a deeply courageous, joyful and universal episcopal fullness.

1. Luigi Versiglia (1873-1930) Bishop, Martyr, Saint

In 1885, St John Bosco revealed to the Salesians gathered at San Benigno Canavese, in Piedmont, that he had dreamed of a crowd of boys who came to meet him saying, 'We have waited so long for you!' In another dream, he saw two large chalices rising towards the sky, one filled with sweat and the other with blood. When, in 1918, a group of Salesian missionaries left Valdocco, in Turin, for Shiu-Chow in Kwang-tung, China, the Rector Major, Fr. Paolo Albera, gave them the chalice with which he had celebrated his golden jubilee of consecration and the 50th anniversary of the sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians. The precious and symbolic gift was handed over by Fr. Sante Garelli to Monsignor Versiglia, who declared: 'Don Bosco saw that when a chalice was filled with blood in China, the Salesian Work would spread wonderfully among this immense people. You bring me the chalice seen by the Father: it is up to me to fill it with blood for the fulfilment of the vision.'

In 1920, the mission of Shiu-Chow in northern Kwang-tung was established as an apostolic vicariate, and rumours immediately spread that Don Versiglia would be

elected vicar and consecrated bishop. He wrote heart-rending letters to his superiors in Turin, declaring his absolute inability and begging them to relieve him of this office. Monsignor De Guébriant, on the other hand, declared publicly that if the choice had been made by popular vote, even the little children would have acclaimed Fr. Versiglia as their father and shepherd.

In 12 years of mission, from 1918 to 1930, Bishop Versiglia managed to perform wonders in a land that was not always favourable to Catholics. The bishop did not stop at anything, not even famine, epidemics, or the defeats that befell him and his collaborators, who were not always rewarded in human terms: apostasies, slanders, abandonments, misunderstandings, cowardice... But everything was overcome thanks to intense, constant prayer.

In the spring of 1923, he contacted the Carmelite convent in Florence to ask for sisters who would pray, suffer, and offer themselves to God for his mission. For his part, he multiplied not only his prayers but also his penances, making use of hair shirts and disciplines. The Carmelite nuns soon formed a high opinion of Monsignor Versiglia, but he wrote to the Mother Superior on 15 October 1928: 'You consider me a saint... No, no, my Reverend Mother: know that you are dealing with the most worthless and needy of missionaries... I do have the desire to be a saint... This too is a fruit of your prayers. But I am far from being one.' Faced with difficulties, lack of means, and limited resources, he exclaimed: 'We have God with us, we have the Virgin Mary Help of Christians, and we also have a great treasure and an inexhaustible wealth: the spirit of Don Bosco.'

At the hour of his martyrdom, the bishop not only wanted to give his life for the safety of the catechists, but above all for the salvation of the young priest who accompanied him, Fr. Callisto Caravario, imploring his attackers: 'I am old, kill me. But he is young, spare him!' It was 25 February 1930. The Salesian spirit of Don Bosco opens up, in the logic of '*da mihi animas*', to the arcane mystery of suffering to the point of martyrdom. Don Bosco said explicitly: 'If the Lord in his Providence should will that any of us should suffer martyrdom, should we be afraid of this?'

2. Luigi Olivares (1873-1943) Bishop, Venerable

On 15 July 1916, Benedict XV promoted Fr. Luigi Olivares, a zealous Salesian parish priest in the church of Santa Maria Liberatrice in Rome-Testaccio, to the episcopal

sees of Sutri and Nepi. The new bishop wrote among his resolutions, “I want charity to be the hallmark of my episcopal life: sincere, patient, beneficial, spiritual, ready for every sacrifice.” This charity was expressed above all in his love for God, in prayer, in perfect conformity to the divine will, in the diligent fulfilment of his duties, and in faithful observance of the law of the Lord. He was ready for any work and sacrifice for the good of souls. The characteristic features of Monsignor Olivares were his amiable manner, his affable countenance, and his delicate soul. He was able to bear witness to the difficult combination that he chose as his episcopal motto, ‘*Suaviter et fortiter*’, echoing the ‘loving kindness’ so instilled by Don Bosco. He loved his priests extraordinarily, always understanding and defending them.

Monsignor Luigi Olivares governed the diocese of Sutri and Nepi from 1916 to 1943 and was Apostolic Administrator of the neighbouring dioceses of Civita Castellana, Orte, and Gallese from 1928 to 1931. He died on 19 May 1943 in Pordenone, where he had gone to preach a course of spiritual exercises to young high school students at the Salesian institute. The reputation for holiness that followed his death was immediate and widespread. One of the doctors who had treated him in the hospital in Pordenone confessed: ‘As long as the Catholic Church has examples like this, it is destined for ever new and greater triumphs. Men like this can preach the Gospel and expect to be listened to even by unbelievers.’

3. Stefano Ferrando (1895-1978) Archbishop, Venerable

On 24 May 1922, at the end of the first Marian procession, the few Salesians in Assam, led by Monsignor Louis Mathias, prayed as follows: ‘We consecrate to you this land, its mountains, its rivers, its people, and all its inhabitants.’ A few years later, the Salesians and others described the Assam Missions as ‘the miracle of Our Lady.’ This reference is valid for the entire missionary reality and Salesian presence in India.

Monsignor Mathias chose as the motto for the pioneering group: ‘*Audacity and hope*.’ But it was not only the pioneers who lived by this motto, but also their successors. Many led heroic lives and their sanctity is in the process of being recognised. Among the best-known names are Costantino Vendrame, Oreste Marengo, Francesco Convertini, and Stefano Ferrando. In Assam, the Church has grown from 5,000 to 1,200,000 Catholics spread across 15 dioceses. In a country with 1.2 billion inhabitants and less than 2% Catholics, the impact of the ‘Don

Bosco' institutions is beyond imagination.

On 9 July 1934, Fr. Stefano Ferrando was appointed, to his surprise, bishop of the diocese of Krishnagar by Pius XI. On 10 November of the same year, he received his solemn episcopal consecration in Shillong. His motto was 'Apostle of Christ'. Just one year later, he returned to Shillong as bishop, where he remained for 34 years. He worked zealously in the vast diocese, which at that time included the entire region of North-East India. Taking possession of the new diocese, he kissed the ground and entrusted its fate to Jesus Crucified. He asked his priests to go to the villages to proclaim the Gospel. He himself travelled constantly. As an apostle of Christ, he visited the mission areas and villages on foot. He used to say to the priests: 'You cannot drive around in cars to convert souls; to get close to the people and solve their problems, you must go on foot.' Following the example of the Apostle of the Gentiles, he made himself all things to all people, learning languages, customs, and traditions in order to understand the ethos of these people and preach Christ to them more effectively. His apostolate was characterised by the Salesian style: joy, simplicity, and direct contact with people. He drew close to young people, the poor, and the needy; he treated everyone with kindness.

Starting with a group of Indian catechists, whom he taught to love Jesus, Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco, the missions and the poor, he founded the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians. On 26 June 1968, after taking part in the Second Vatican Council, he resigned from his diocese. In Italy, the old missionary bishop retired to the Salesian house in Quarto (Genoa). In 1970, he wrote: 'Here in Italy, people often ask me: 'Why did you leave Assam after 47 years of missionary life? I reply: because the day that for 47 years I had been longing for, has finally come, the day when the Church in India can stand on its own feet!' He died on 20 June 1978.

4. Ottavio Ortiz Arrieta (1878-1958) Bishop, Venerable

The first Salesian, the first Salesian priest, and the first Salesian bishop of Peru, was still very young when he was described as 'a pearl of the Salesians'. In 1918, the diocese of Chachapoyas became vacant. On the proposal of the Apostolic Nuncio, Monsignor Lorenzo Lauri, Ortiz Arrieta was elected and consecrated bishop on 11 June 1922. At that time, the diocese of Chachapoyas covered an area of 95,200 square kilometres and had a population of 250,000 souls. After a month's journey,

he reached his episcopal see, welcomed like an angel sent from heaven, after five years of vacancy. He was a model bishop and became a martyr of duty. He always wanted to visit his children. His life was one of constant travel: long days on horseback, on foot, in the mountains, in the forests, on the rivers.

He climbed to icy peaks and then descended into torrid valleys.

He never allowed himself any real holidays. When he was away, his thoughts turned to where he had 'so many souls seeking their Shepherd'. He always maintained the Salesian style: amiable, welcoming, habitually cheerful, close to the people. Young people filled the halls of his old episcopal palace. He organised a band and would himself simply replace any musician who failed to turn up. With a passion for catechism in his heart, he taught it whenever time allowed. He was a born organiser; he celebrated three diocesan Synods and organised a successful Eucharistic Congress. He reorganised the parish archives; he created associations and confraternities; he published a newspaper.

He had a special love for his priests. He lived in the seminary and once a month he became a seminarian himself, sharing their life in everything. He shunned honours. When he was offered the primatial see of Lima, he insisted on remaining in his humble Chachapoyas. He was a man of great interior life, always united with God, whom he saw in every event. When he preached, everyone felt his priestly holiness and the flame of God's love burning in his heart. His face was serene in moments of both joy and trial, because he had the art of hiding his pain behind a constant smile.

5. Augusto Hlond (1881-1948) Cardinal, Venerable

In 1922, when the Holy See had to provide for the religious settlement of Polish Silesia, still bleeding from political and national struggles, Pope Pius XI entrusted Monsignor August Hlond with this delicate mission, appointing him Apostolic Administrator. With his charity, his rectitude, and his spirit of sacrifice, Monsignor Hlond was able, in three years, to settle matters to the satisfaction of both Poles and Germans, so that the Holy See was able to create the new diocese of Katowice in 1925. On 24 June 1926, Pius XI promoted him to the archiepiscopal sees of Gniezno and Poznan and appointed him Primate of Poland. The following year, on 20 June, he created him cardinal and assigned him the title of Santa Maria della Pace. During his 21 years as cardinal, in addition to his ordinary pastoral ministry in the

two archdioceses, he devoted all his energies as Primate to the heroic Polish nation during a dramatically difficult period. A loyal patriot and sensitive to all the sufferings he shared with his people, he was also entrusted by the Holy See with the care of Poles in the diaspora, scattered throughout the world. In order to provide them with all the spiritual assistance they needed, he was invited by Pope Pius XI to found a congregation: the Society of Christ the King for Polish Emigrants.

Unfortunately, the Second World War disrupted his pastoral work. Indeed, when Poland was invaded, the cardinal was one of the first victims targeted by the Nazis, who saw in him an intrepid and authoritative defender of human rights, of the freedom of the homeland and of the Church. Thus began his ordeal, which forced him into exile until the end of the war. Upon his return to Poland, while retaining his primatial see in Gniezno, he was appointed Archbishop of Warsaw. Unfortunately, even in Poland, the joy of liberation was soon overshadowed by extremist violence and Soviet pressure, which even led to the breakdown of the Concordat. However, the cardinal, strong in his faith and proud of his patriotism, just as he had defended the Polish people from the horrors of Nazism, continued to defend them with pastoral vigour from Bolshevism, devoting himself to the protection of the oppressed, the resolution of social issues, and the comfort and assistance of the hungry and homeless. The Holy See also entrusted him with the religious organisation of the German zone, ceded to Poland in compensation for the territories absorbed by Russia; a colossal task, which he carried out with great tact and promptness, establishing five large Apostolic Administrations and appointing their respective heads on behalf of the Holy See. Divine Providence saved him from more than one assassination attempt, reserving for him the passage of the great patriarchs. He died in Warsaw on 22 October 1948, and his funeral was an apotheosis.

In the history of the Church in Poland, Cardinal August Hlond was one of the most eminent figures for his religious witness of life, for the greatness, variety, and originality of his pastoral ministry, and for the sufferings he endured with an intrepid Christian spirit for the Kingdom of God, making one of the most heroic periods in the history of the Polish people shine with a most vivid light. His life was intimately intertwined, both in terms of spiritual values and the external events in which he was involved, with the lives of the people entrusted to him by the Church, whom he loved and served as a true shepherd and father. As Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, Primate of Poland and successor to Cardinal Hlond, declared: "He was, without a

doubt, a man of State! However, what prevails in Cardinal Hlond's life is his deeply religious soul, his profound faith, a soul as sincere as the Silesian people, perhaps as hard as coal, the fruit of that land, but ardent in the simplicity of his deep faith and his total dedication to God."

6. Antonio de Almeida Lustosa (1886-1974) Archbishop, Servant of God

In 1924, he was appointed bishop of Uberaba (Brazil), a diocese in the so-called 'Mining Triangle'. He wanted to be consecrated on 11 February 1925, in memory of the presence of Our Lady in his life. He entered the diocese welcomed by a population doubly jubilant: for the arrival of their new pastor after two years of vacancy and for a torrential rain, awaited after months of drought and scorching heat. He found the minor seminary empty and the major seminary with only one deacon. The following year, he had about thirty seminarians from the gymnasium around him. He devoted himself entirely to his pastoral ministry, visiting all the parishes and inhabited centres of the diocese, which was then very extensive, with long and uncomfortable journeys.

In 1928, after less than three years, he was transferred to Corumbá, in Mato Grosso, a larger diocese with greater difficulties for evangelisation. Three years later, he was appointed archbishop of Belém do Pará, an immense diocese in the north. He remained there for ten years, working tirelessly with his usual generosity. The apostolic nuncio Aloisi Masella described him as one of the most eminent figures of the Brazilian episcopate for his holiness and pastoral dedication. In 1941, he was transferred to the important see of Fortaleza, capital of the state of Ceará. He arrived there in the prime of his life and spiritual experience, and there he gave the best of himself, leaving behind, after twenty-two years, the most significant mark of his apostolic zeal and holiness.

Monsignor Lustosa was a great ascetic, and this was also apparent in his outward appearance; his physical person was described as 'an airy shell'. He was endowed with an adamant will that betrayed the fire burning within him. He lived poorly: "I have nothing", he wrote in his will. He was a man of prayer, humble and devoted to penance. He knew how to approach everyone, especially the neediest. 'I would simply continue to work here for the *Our Father*: Hallowed be thy name! Thy kingdom come; the programme of a bishop is always the same: to do his duty!'

7. Giuseppe Guarino (1827-1897) Cardinal, Salesian Cooperator, Servant of God

He was born in Montedoro, in the province of Caltanissetta, on 6 March 1827, studied at the seminary in Agrigento, and was ordained a priest in 1849. In 1871, he was elected Archbishop of Syracuse, where he won hearts and reinvigorated religious fervour. In 1875, Pius IX entrusted him with the Archdiocese of Messina, which Monsignor Guarino would lead for 22 years. He was particularly responsible for the reorganisation of the seminary and the active and meritorious presence of religious men and women called to collaborate with him. In addition, in 1889, he founded a new religious family: the Little Servants – today Apostles – of the Holy Family, entrusting them with the mission of working for the religious and social growth and maturation of young women and for the integral promotion of the family. He distinguished himself above all for his active charity, which reached the heights of heroism during the smallpox and cholera epidemics that struck Messina between 1885 and 1887. Then, during the earthquake that devastated the city in 1894, he offered his life to God so that damage and casualties would be limited. In the Consistory of 18 January 1893, he was created cardinal by Leo XIII. He died in Messina on 21 September 1897.

Cardinal Guarino always admired Don Bosco and, although he maintained only a correspondence with him, he supported him in his works, so much so that he received the title of ‘Salesian cooperator’ from the holy educator. “He seemed completely filled with the spirit of Don Bosco, affable and kind to everyone,” wrote one of his biographers. For the sake of young people, the servant of God asked Don Bosco to send Salesians to Messina, but only obtained them in 1893 from his successor, Fr. Rua.

8. Oreste Marengo (1906-1998) Bishop, Servant of God

He was returning from a long tour of apostolic activity in July 1951 when he was struck by news he did not expect or desire: his appointment as bishop of the newly established diocese of Dibrugarh. His protests and tears were in vain; he surrendered only when the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, wrote to him “that it was his wish that he would accept the appointment, in the certainty

that Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco would help him to fulfil it.” He was consecrated bishop in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin on 27 December 1951. The diocese entrusted to him occupied the northern part of Assam and covered an area of 130,000 square kilometres, with a population of 3,365,000, of whom only 40,000 were Catholics. When he took office, there were only five mission centres, with 200 small communities scattered throughout the immense territory. He worked tirelessly to increase the number of residential centres, form catechists, build schools, chapels, and dispensaries, approach new tribes, and open Aspirantates to recruit indigenous vocations for the seminary and for the religious congregations he had called to work in his diocese. Conversions multiplied like a new Pentecost. He administered thousands of baptisms, confirmations, and marriages. He climbed impassable paths to visit all the communities; he calmly faced the hostility of nature, of separated brothers and sisters, and of tribes in revolt, winning everyone over with his unalterable goodness and generous charity.

When the diocese was in full development and beginning to enjoy the fruits of so much hard work, a new obedience came. In 1964, the Holy See invited him to move to Tezpur to open a new diocese, which included part of Assam, the entire state of Bhutan, and the hilly area north-east of the Brahmaputra: a territory of about 130,000 square kilometres with 1,500,000 inhabitants, of whom only 48,000 were Catholics. He threw himself into his new work with his usual enthusiasm, assisted by his valiant confreres, to extend the peaceful frontiers of the Church, overcoming obstacles and difficulties of all kinds, compounded by a growing hostility towards foreigners in the area. For this reason, after eight years of intense work, the Holy See decided to entrust this diocese to an Indian bishop.

In 1972, Monsignor Marengo was invited to start his third diocese in Tura, a vast territory inhabited mainly by the Garo tribe, many of whom were refugees from eastern Pakistan. There were only 36,000 Catholics, with 14 missionaries working in the main centres. He built the bishop’s palace, the cathedral, and new residences, multiplying charitable works for the many poor, lepers, and refugees. Within a few years, this diocese also experienced unexpected growth, so much so that in 1978, in accordance with government regulations, it was entrusted to a bishop from the local clergy.

Despite the new bishop’s insistence that he remain with him in Tura, Monsignor Marengo preferred to retire to Mendal, 63 kilometres from the capital, to help the person in charge of the area, who had to look after 20 communities, in order to give him full freedom of action. Thus, at the age of 76, 58 of which he had spent on

mission, this man continued his apostolic work in the service of mankind as a simple itinerant missionary. He continued to make himself available for various missions until his death in Tura on 30 July 1998. Until the end of his long life, Monsignor Marengo was a heroic missionary, a living icon of the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. Obedience to his superiors, concern for the salvation of souls, and typical Salesian optimism were the most evident and beloved characteristics of this Salesian missionary bishop in north-eastern India.

9. Letter from Don Bosco to Monsignor Edoardo Rosaz (1830-1903), Bishop of Susa, beatified by St. John Paul II in 1991

Elected bishop of Susa, where he was canon, Monsignor Rosaz was pre-announced in the last consistory of Pius IX on 31 December 1877. He left a reputation as a skilled and virtuous prelate. He loved Don Bosco very much.

Dearest and Most Reverend Monsignor,

In due course, I received from Turin and then from your dear letter how the great Pope Pius IX expressed his paternal thoughts about you and proclaimed you Bishop of Susa. I was quite surprised because I know how humble you are and how you will have to adopt a new attitude in word and deed. But I immediately blessed the Lord because I was and am convinced that the Church was gaining a bishop after God's heart and that you would do great good for the Diocese of Susa.

I am very happy about this and with all the affection of my heart I offer you all the houses of our Congregation for whatever service they may render to your respectable person or to the Diocese that Divine Providence has entrusted to you.

I do not presume to act as your teacher, but I believe that you will soon have the hearts of all in your hands:

1° If you take special care of the sick, the elderly, and poor children.

2° Proceed very slowly in making changes to the personnel already established by

your predecessor.

3° Do what you can to earn the esteem and affection of some who held or hold high positions in the diocese; they feel they have been neglected and that you have been favoured.

4° *In taking severe measures against anyone in the clergy, you should proceed with caution and listen to the accused as much as possible. I hope that we will be able to speak in person in March.*

Today, at about 3:30 p.m., the supreme and incomparable star of the Church, Pius IX, passed away. The newspapers will give you the details. Rome is in consternation, as I believe the whole world is. He will certainly be on the altars within a very short time.

I believe that you will allow me to continue writing to you with the confidence of the past. Praying to God to enlighten you and keep you in good health, I commend myself to the charity of your holy prayers and profess my utmost veneration.

Your Most Reverend and Most Beloved

Rome, 7 February 1878, Torre de' Specchi, 36.

Your most affectionate friend, Fr. Gio. Bosco.

Conclusion

Two signs that express well the way of being a bishop according to the spirit of Don

Bosco.

The rosary of St. Louis Versiglia: a sign of unconditional entrustment of one's life and mission to the Help of the Church and Queen of the Apostles.

The hair shirt of this martyred bishop: a sign that there is no apostolic fruitfulness without sacrifice and self-giving even to the point of martyrdom, there is no '*Da mihi animas*' without '*Caetera tolle*'.

Contemplating the great altarpiece by Lorenzone, commissioned by Don Bosco for the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, we see how Mary is represented crowned by the apostles, the first bishops, each of whom is depicted holding the instrument of his martyrdom. The canvas in the apse, with its beautiful image of the Virgin, represents both Don Bosco's ecclesiology and his Mariology. Mary is the figure of the Church, her mother and model, where the face of the mother is the same as the face of the Son, and where she appears supported by Peter and Paul and surrounded by the apostles and evangelists. In a word: an apostolic and missionary Church. Don Bosco's Virgin is a Queen, yes, crowned with twelve stars and clothed with the sun, like the Woman of the Apocalypse, loving, provident, with her arms open to give and offer her Son. The Son, for his part, according to Don Bosco's words, "holds His arms open, thus offering His graces and mercy to those who turn to His August Mother." Don Bosco's Virgin 'is clothed with the sun', full of power, because she is immersed in the sea of light that is God, immersed in the mystery of the Trinity, which illuminates her person and her mission. This is how Don Bosco wanted her to be and this is how he managed to represent her in Lorenzone's painting, who, filled with emotion, exclaimed, "It is not I who paint. It is another hand that guides mine."

Don Bosco's Virgin is an image of the Church, the heavenly Church that already celebrates the wedding of the Lamb, and the earthly Church that walks in this world, immersed in the mystery of God and enveloped in His light, yet present in our historical vicissitudes, attentive to our needs, present and alive in our families, as in all the Salesian Houses, ideally represented in the Church of Valdocco, which appears in the lower part of the painting. This is the great insight of Don Bosco, who united the titles of Mary Help of Christians and Mother of the Church, placing the proper role of the Virgin at the heart of the Church's mission, which protects all her faithful under her mantle, nourishes them, and brings them to maturity until they reach the fullness of life in Christ. The meaning of the entire painting is very clear. Just as Mary was present together with the apostles in Jerusalem during Pentecost,

at the beginning of the Church's activity, so she continues to protect and guide the Church throughout the centuries. Mary is the 'Mother of the Church', *Auxilium Christianorum et Auxilium episcoporum*, in her ongoing struggle for the spread of the Kingdom of God.