 Reading time: 6 min.

The cause for the canonisation of the servant of God, Constantine Vendrame, is advancing. On 19 September 2023, the volume of the "Positio super Vita, Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis" was delivered to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican. Let us briefly introduce this professed priest of the Society of St Francis de Sales.

From the hills of Veneto to the hills of North-East India

The Servant of God Fr Constantine Vendrame was born in San Martino di Colle Umberto (Treviso) on 27 August 1893. San Martino, a hamlet of the larger town of Colle Umberto, is a charming Italian town in the Veneto region in the province of Treviso: From its hills, San Martino faces both the plains furrowed by the Piave river, and the foothills of the Alps in the Belluno area. This same dual nature – a hill town that looks towards the mountains and the plains, the proximity to the larger population centres and ideal projection to the more sober world of the mountains, is what the future missionary Fr Costantino would find in North-East India, squeezed between the first spurs of the Himalayan chain and the Brahmaputra valley.

His family also belonged to the world of simple people: his father Pietro, a blacksmith by profession, and his mother Elena Fiori, originally from Cadore, whom he most likely met in the mountains. Fr Vendrame's ties with his siblings were strong: Giovanni, of whom he retained faithful memories; Antonia, the mother of a large family; his beloved Angela, to whom he was united by deep affection, in harmony of works and intentions. Angela would remain – with exuberant creativity – at the service of the parish and would offer her suffering and merits for her brother's apostolic, missionary enterprise. Vivid in the family was also the memory of her elder brother Canciano, who flew to heaven at only 13 years of age. He was baptised the day after his birth (28 August) and confirmed in November 1898, and then lost his his father. Constantine Vendrame made his first communion on 21 July 1904 and spent his childhood with the usual routine tasks. And this is how the priestly vocation took shape as a child. It perhaps has its roots in little Constantino's entrustment to Our Lady – through his mother's initiative: an entrustment that then matured into a more complete gift of self.



However, the reality of the seminary – which the Servant of God attended in Ceneda (Vittorio Veneto) with complete success – lacked the missionary inspiration that he felt was his. So, he turned to the Salesians and it was in the Salesian house at Mogliano Veneto that "'in the small porter's lodge in 1912 with the good Fr Dones that my Salesian and missionary vocation was decided."
He completed the stages of formation as a religious among the Sons of Don Bosco, in particular as an aspirant (from October 1912 in Verona), novice (from 24 August 1913 in Ivrea), temporary professed (in 1914) and perpetual professed confrere (from 1 January 1920 in Chioggia). He was ordained a priest in Milan on 15 March 1924. From the time he was admitted to the novitiate, he was described a "'very firm in practice, and well educated." His marks at the seminary had always been excellent and he did well in the Society of St Francis de Sales.
His preparatory course was marked by compulsory military service. These were the years of the Great War: 1914-1918 (for Italy: 1915-1918). In those moments Vendrame as a cleric did not go backwards; he opened up to his superiors; he kept

his commitments. The years of the First World War further forged in him the courage that would be so useful to him in his missions.

Missionary of fire



Fr ConstantineVendrame received the missionary crucifix in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin on 5 October 1924. A few weeks later he embarked from Venice for India: destination Assam, in the North-East. He arrived there in time for Christmas. On a little picture he wrote, “Sacred Heart of Jesus, everything I have confided in you, everything I have hoped for from you and I have not been deceived.” With the confreres, he meditated during the journey on *Meeting the King of Love*: “Everything is here: the whole Gospel, the whole Law. I have loved you […]”, “I have loved you more than my life, because I gave my life for you – and when one has given one’s life, one has given everything”. This is the programme of his missionary commitment.

Compared to the younger Salesians – who would have completed most of their formation in India – he arrived there already complete, in full vigour: he was 31

years old and was able to benefit not only from his tough experience in the war, but also from his practical training in the Italian oratories. A beautiful and difficult land awaited him, where paganism of an “animist” stamp dominated and some Protestant sects were openly prejudiced towards the Catholic Church. He chose contact with the people, decided to take the first step: he started with the children, whom he taught to pray and allowed to play. It was these “’little friends” (a few Catholics, some Protestants, almost all non-Christians) who talked about Jesus and the Catholic missionary in the family, who helped Father Vendrame in his apostolate. He was flanked by his confreres – who over the years would recognise him as the “pioneer” of Salesian missionary activity in Assam – and by valid lay collaborators, trained over time.
Of this early period, traces remain of a missionary of “fire”, animated by the sole interest in the glory of God and the salvation of souls. His style became that of the Apostle to the Gentiles, to whom he would be compared for the propulsive efficacy of his proclamation and the strong attraction of the pagans to Christ. “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!” (cf. 1 Cor 9:16), says Fr Vendrame with his life. He exposed himself to all wear and tear, as long as Christ is proclaimed. Truly for him too “Countless journeys, dangers from the rivers […], dangers from the pagans […]; hardship and toil, vigils without number, hunger and thirst, frequent fasting, cold and nakedness” (cf. 2 Cor 11:26-27). The Servant of God became a walker in North-East India with all kinds of dangers; he supported himself with a very meagre diet; he faced late night returns or nights spent almost freezing cold.

Always in the trenches

At the outbreak of the Second World War and in the years that followed, Fr Costantino Vendrame was able to benefit from – at times of particular “environmental” fatigue (military camps; extreme poverty in South India) and “ecclesial” hardship (harsh opposition in North East India) – a whole range of prior training: in the custody of the Gurkhas; in Deoli; in Dehra Dun; missionary in Wandiwash in Tamil Nadu; in Mawkhar in Assam. In Deoli he was “rector” of the religious in the camp; also in Dehra Dun he set an example.
Liberated at the end of the war, but prevented by political reasons completely foreign to him as a person from returning to Assam, Fr Vendrame – who was over 50 and worn out by privations – was assigned by Louis Mathias, Archbishop of Madras, to Tamil Nadu. There Fr Costantino had to start all over again: once again, he knew how to make himself deeply loved, aware – as he wrote in a 1950 letter to his brother priests in the Diocese of Vittorio Veneto – of the extremely harsh conditions of his missionary mandate:

He was convinced that there was good to be done everywhere and wherever there were souls to be saved. Remaining “ad experimentum”, so as to guarantee continuity to the poor mission, he finally returned to Assam: he could rest, but plans were made to establish a Catholic presence in Mawkhar, a district of Shillong then considered the “fort” of the Protestants.
And it was precisely in Mawkhar that the Servant of God achieved his “masterpiece”: the birth of a Catholic community that is still flourishing today, in which – in years far removed from today’s ecumenical sensibility – the Catholic presence was first harshly opposed, then tolerated, then accepted and finally esteemed. The unity and charity witnessed by Fr Vendrame was for Mawkhar an unprecedented and “scandalous” proclamation, which won over the hardest hearts and attracted the benevolence of many: he had brought the “honey of St Francis”- that is, Salesian loving-kindness, inspired by the gentleness of Salesian – to a land where souls had closed.

Towards the finish line
When pain became insistent, he admitted in a letter: “with difficulty I was able to manage the work of the day.” The last stretch of the earthly journey unfolded. The day arrived when he asked to check if there was any food left: a unique request for Fr Vendrame, who made himself enough of the essentials and, returning late, never wanted to disturb for dinner. That evening he could not even articulate a few sentences: he was exhausted, aged prematurely. He had kept silent until the very end, prey to an arthritis that also affected his spine.
Hospitalization then loomed, but at Dibrugarh: it would spare him the constant flocking of people; the pain of helplessly witnessing their father’s agony. The Servant of God would go so far as to faint from pain: every movement became terrible for him.
Bishop Orestes Marengo – his friend and former cleric, Bishop of Dibrugarh, the Sisters of the Child Mary, some lay people, the medical staff including many nurses, won over by his gentleness.
Everyone recognised him as a true man of God: even non-Christians. Fr Vendrame in his suffering could say, like Jesus “I am not alone, for the Father is with me”(cf. Jn 16:32).
Tried by illness and complications from pneumonia, he died on 30 January 1957 on the eve of the feast of St John Bosco. Just a few days earlier (24 January), in his last letter to his sister Angela he was still thinking of his apostolate, lucid in suffering but a man of hope always.
He was so poor that he did not even have a suitable burial robe: Bishop Marengo

gave him one of his own so that he could be more worthily clothed. One witness recounts how handsome Fr Costantino looked in death, even better than in life, finally freed from the “fatigues” and “strains” that had marked so many decades. After an initial funeral / farewell service in Diburgarh, the wake and solemn funeral took place in Shillong. The people flocked with so many flowers that it looked like a Eucharistic procession. The crowd was immense, many approached the sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion: this generalised attitude of drawing closer to God, even on the part of those who had turned away from Him, was one of the greatest signs that accompanied Fr Constantine’s death.