 Reading time: 14 min.

The venerable Father Francesco Convertini, a Salesian missionary in India, emerges as a shepherd after the Heart of Jesus, forged by the Spirit and totally faithful to the divine plan for his life. Through the testimonies of those who met him, his profound humility, unconditional dedication to the proclamation of the Gospel, and fervent love for God and neighbor are revealed. He lived with joyful evangelical simplicity, facing hardships and sacrifices with courage and generosity, always attentive to everyone he met along his path. The text highlights his extraordinary humanity and spiritual richness, a precious gift for the Church.

1. Farmer in the vineyard of the Lord

Presenting the virtuous profile of Father Francesco Convertini, Salesian missionary in India, a man who let himself be moulded by the Spirit and knew how to realise his spiritual physiognomy according to God's plan for him, is something both beautiful and serious because it recalls the true meaning of life, as a response to a call, a promise, a project of grace.

There is a quite original summary sketched about him by a priest from his town, Fr Quirico Vasta, who got to know Father Francis (as he was known in India) on rare visits to his beloved Apulia. This witness offers us a summary of the virtuous profile of the great missionary, introducing us in an authoritative and compelling way to discover something of the human and religious stature of this man of God. "The way to measure the spiritual stature of this holy man, Father Francis Convertini, is not an analytical approach, comparing his life to the many religious 'parameters of behaviour' (Father Francis, as a Salesian, also accepted the commitments proper to a religious: poverty, obedience, chastity, and remained faithful to them throughout his life). On the contrary, Father Francis Convertini appears, in summary, as he really was from the beginning: a young peasant farmer who, after – and perhaps because of – the ugliness of the war, opened himself up to the light of the Spirit and leaving everything behind, set out to follow the Lord. On the one hand, he knew what he was leaving behind; and he left it not only with the vigour typical of the southern peasant who was poor but tenacious; but also joyfully and with the very personal strength of spirit that the war had invigorated: the strength of someone who intends to pursue headlong, albeit silently and in the depths of his soul, what he has focused his attention on. On the other hand, again like a peasant who has grasped the 'certainties' of the future and the groundedness of his hopes in something or someone and knows 'who to trust' he allowed the light

of the one who has spoken to him put him in a position of clarity in what to do. And he immediately adopted the strategies to achieve the goal: prayer and availability without measure, whatever the cost. It is no coincidence that the key virtues of this holy man are silent activity without show (cf. St Paul: 'It is when I am weak that I am strong') and a very respectful sense of others (cf. Acts: 'There is more joy in giving than in receiving').
Seen in this way, Father Francis Convertini was truly a man: shy, inclined to conceal his gifts and merits, averse to boasting, gentle with others and strong with himself, measured, balanced, prudent and faithful; a man of faith, hope and in habitual communion with God; an exemplary religious, in obedience, poverty and chastity."

2. Distinguishing traits: "charm emanated from him, which healed you".

Retracing the stages of his childhood and youth, his preparation for the priesthood and missionary life, God's special love for his servant and his correspondence with this good Father are evident. In particular, they stand out as distinctive features of his spiritual character:

– *Unbounded faith and trust in God, embodied in filial abandonment to the divine will.*

He had great faith in the infinite goodness and mercy of God and in the great merits of the passion and death of Jesus Christ, in whom he confided everything and from whom he expected everything. On the firm rock of this faith he undertook all his apostolic labours. Cold or heat, tropical rain or scorching sun, difficulty or fatigue, nothing prevented him from always proceeding with confidence when it was a matter of God's glory and the salvation of souls.

– *Unconditional love for Jesus Christ the Saviour, to whom he offered everything as a sacrifice, beginning with his own life, consigned to the cause of the Kingdom.*

Father Convertini rejoiced in the promise of the Saviour and rejoiced in the coming of Jesus, as universal Saviour and sole mediator between God and man: "Jesus gave us all of Himself by dying on the cross, and shall we not be able to give ourselves completely to Him?"

– *Integral salvation of our neighbour, pursued with passionate evangelisation.*

The abundant fruits of his missionary work were due to his unceasing prayer and unsparing sacrifices made for his neighbour. It is people and missionaries of such temperament who leave an indelible mark on the history of the Salesian

missions, charism and priestly ministry.

Even in contact with Hindus and Muslims, while on the one hand he was urged by a genuine desire to proclaim the Gospel, which often led to the Christian faith, on the other hand he felt compelled to emphasise the basic truths easily perceived even by non-Christians, such as the infinite goodness of God, love of neighbour as the way to salvation, and prayer as the means to obtain graces.

– Unceasing union with God through prayer, the sacraments, entrustment to Mary Mother of God and ours, love for the Church and the Pope, devotion to the saints.

He felt himself to be a son of the Church and served her with the heart of an authentic disciple of Jesus and missionary of the Gospel, entrusted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and in the company of the saints felt as intercessors and friends.

– Simple and humble evangelical asceticism in the following of the cross, incarnated in an extraordinarily ordinary life.

His profound humility, evangelical poverty (he carried with him only what was necessary) and angelic countenance transpired from his whole person. Voluntary penance, self-control: little or no rest, irregular meals. He deprived himself of everything to give to the poor, even his clothes, shoes, bed and food. He always slept on the floor. He fasted for a long time. As the years went by, he contracted several illnesses that undermined his health: he suffered from asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, heart ailments… many times they attacked him in such a way that he was bedridden. It was a marvel how he could bear it all without complaining. It was precisely this that attracted the veneration of the Hindus, for whom he was the “sanyasi”, the one who knew how to renounce everything for the love of God and for their sake.

His life seemed to be a straight ascent to the heights of holiness in the faithful fulfilment of God’s will and in the gift of himself to his brothers and sisters through the priestly ministry lived faithfully. Lay, religious and clergy alike speak of his extraordinary way of living daily life.

3. Missionary of the Gospel of joy: “I proclaimed Jesus to them. Jesus the Saviour. Merciful Jesus.”

There was not a day when he did not go to some family to talk about Jesus and the Gospel. Father Francis had such enthusiasm and zeal that he even hoped

for things that seemed humanly impossible. Father Francis became famous as a peacemaker between families, or between villages in discord. “It is not through arguments that we come to understand. God and Jesus are beyond dispute. We must above all pray and God will give us the gift of faith. Through faith one will find the Lord. Is it not written in the Bible that God is love? By the way of love one comes to God.”

He was an inwardly peaceful man and brought peace. He wanted this to exist among people, in homes or villages, where there should be no quarrels, or fights, or divisions. “In our village we were Catholics, Protestants, Hindus and Muslims. So that peace would reign among us, from time to time father would gather us all together and tell us how we could and should live in peace among ourselves.” Then he would listen to those who wanted to say something and at the end, after praying, he would give the blessing: a wonderful way to keep the peace among us. He had a truly astonishing peace of mind; it was the strength that came from the certainty he had of doing God’s will, sought with effort, but then embraced with love once found.

He was a man who lived with evangelical simplicity, the transparency of a child, a willingness to make every sacrifice, knowing how to get in tune with every person he met on his path, travelling on horseback, or on a bicycle, or more often walking whole days with his rucksack on his shoulders. He belonged to everyone without distinction of religion, caste or social status. He was loved by all, because to all he brought “the water of Jesus that saves”.

4. A man of contagious faith: lips in prayer, rosary in hands, eyes to heaven

“We know from him that he never neglected prayer, both when he was with others and when he was alone, even as a soldier. This helped him to do everything for God, especially when he did first evangelisation among us. For him, there was no fixed time: morning or evening, sun or rain; heat or cold were no impediment when it came to talking about Jesus or doing good. When he went to the villages he would walk even at night and without taking food in order to get to some house or village to preach the Gospel. Even when he was placed as a confessor in Krishnagar, he would come to us for confessions during the sweltering heat of after lunch. I once said to him, “Why do you come at this hour?” And he replied, “In the passion, Jesus did not choose his convenient time when he was being led by Annas or Caiaphas or Pilate. He had to do it even against his own will, to do the Father’s will.”

He evangelised not by proselytism, but by attraction. It was his behaviour

that attracted people. His dedication and love made people say that Father Francis was the true image of the Jesus he preached. His love of God led him to seek intimate union with him, to collect himself in prayer, to avoid anything that might displease God. He knew that one only knows God through charity. He used to say, “Love God, do not displease Him.”

“If there was one sacrament in which Father Francis excelled heroically, it was the administration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For any person in our diocese of Krishnagar to say Father Francis is to say the man of God who showed the Father’s fatherhood in forgiveness especially in the confessional. He spent the last 40 years of his life more in the confessional than in any other ministry: hours and hours, especially in preparation for feasts and solemnities. Thus the whole night of Christmas and Easter or patronal feasts. He was always punctually present in the confessional every day, but especially on Sundays before Masses or on the evening eve of feasts and Saturdays. Then he would go to other places where he was a regular confessor. This was a task very dear to him and much expected by all the religious of the diocese, for who he was available weekly. His confessional was always the most crowded and most desired. Priests, religious, ordinary people: it seemed as if Father Francis knew everyone personally, so pertinent was he in his advice and admonitions. I myself marvelled at the wisdom of his admonitions when I went to confession to him. In fact, the Servant of God was my confessor throughout his life, from the time he was a missionary in the villages until the end of his days. I used to say to myself: “That is just what I wanted to hear from him…”. Bishop Morrow, who went to him regularly for confession, considered him his spiritual guide, saying that Father Francis was guided by the Holy Spirit in his counsels and that his personal holiness made up for his lack of natural gifts.

Trust in God’s mercy was an almost nagging theme in his conversations, and he used it well as a confessor. His confessional ministry was a ministry of hope for himself and for those who confessed to him. His words inspired hope in all who came to him. “In the confessional the Servant of God was the model priest, famous for administering this sacrament. The Servant of God was always teaching, trying to lead everyone to eternal salvation… The servant of God liked to direct his prayers to the Father who is in heaven, and he also taught people to see the good Father in God. Especially to those in difficulties, including spiritual ones, and to repentant sinners, he reminded them that God is merciful and that one must always trust in him. The Servant of God increased his prayers and mortifications to discount his infidelities, as he said, and for the sins of the world.”

Father Rosario Stroscio, religious superior, who concluded the announcement of Father Francis' death, spoke eloquently as follows: "Those who knew Father Francis will always remember with love the little warnings and exhortations he used to give in confession. With his weak little voice, yet so full of ardour: 'Let us love souls, let us work only for souls.... Let us approach the people... Let us deal with them in such a way that the people understand that we love them...' His entire life was a magnificent testimony to the most fruitful technique of priestly ministry and missionary work. We can sum it up in the simple expression: 'To win souls to Christ there is no more powerful means than goodness and love!'"

5. He loved God and loved his neighbour for God's sake: Put love! Put love!

His mother Catherine used to say "Put love! Put love!" to Ciccilluzzo, his nickname at home as he helped in the fields watching turkeys and doing other work appropriate to his young age,

"Father Francisco gave everything to God, because he was convinced that having consecrated everything to him as a religious and missionary priest, God had full rights over him. When we asked him why he did not go home (to Italy), he replied that he had now given himself entirely to God and to us." His being a priest was all for others: "I am a priest for the good of my neighbour. This is my first duty." He felt indebted to God in everything, indeed, everything belonged to God and to his neighbour, while he had given himself totally, reserving nothing for himself: Father Francesco continually thanked the Lord for choosing him to be a missionary priest. He showed this sense of gratitude towards anyone who had done anything for him, even the poorest.

He gave extraordinary examples of fortitude by adapting to the living conditions of the missionary work assigned to him: a new and difficult language, which he tried to learn quite well, because this was the way to communicate with his people; a very harsh climate, that of Bengal, the grave of so many missionaries, which he learned to endure for the love of God and souls; apostolic journeys on foot through unknown areas, with the risk of encountering wild animals.

He was a tireless missionary and evangeliser in a very difficult area such as Krishnagar – which he wanted to transform into Christ-nagar, the city of Christ – where conversions were difficult, not to mention the opposition of Protestants and members of other religions. For the administration of the sacraments he faced all possible dangers: rain, hunger, disease, wild beasts, malicious people. "I have often heard the episode about Father Francesco, who one night, while taking the Blessed

Sacrament to a sick person, came across a tiger crouching on the path where he and his companions had to pass… As the companions tried to flee, the Servant of God commanded the tiger: “Let your Lord pass!”, and the tiger moved away. But I have heard other similar examples about the Servant of God, who many times travelled on foot at night. Once a band of brigands attacked him, believing they could steal something from him. But when they saw him thus deprived of everything except what he was carrying, they excused themselves and accompanied him to the next village.”

His life as a missionary was constant travelling: by bicycle, on horseback and most of the time on foot. This walking on foot is perhaps the attitude that best portrays the tireless missionary and the sign of the authentic evangeliser: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger of glad tidings who proclaims peace, the messenger of good things who proclaims salvation” (Is 52:7).

6. Clear eyes turned to heaven

“Observing the smiling face of the Servant of God and looking at his eyes clear and turned to heaven, one thought that he did not belong here, but in heaven. On seeing him for the very first time, many reported an unforgettable impression of him: his shining eyes that showed a face full of simplicity and innocence and his long, venerable beard recalled the image of a person full of goodness and compassion. One witness stated: “Father Francis was a saint. I do not know how to make a judgement, but I think that such people are not easily found. We were small, but he talked to us, he never despised anyone. He did not differentiate between Muslims and Christians. Father went to everyone in the same way and when we were together he treated us all the same. He would give us children advice: ‘Obey your parents, do your homework well, love each other as brothers’. He would then give us little sweets: in his pockets there was always something for us.”

Father Francis displayed his love for God above all through prayer, which seemed to be uninterrupted. He could always be seen moving his lips in prayer. Even when he spoke to people, he always kept his eyes raised as if he were seeing someone he was talking to. What most often struck people was Father Convertini’s ability to be totally focused on God and, at the same time, on the person in front of him, looking with sincere eyes at the brother he met on his path: “Without a doubt he had his eyes fixed on the face of God. This was an indelible trait of his soul, a spiritual concentration of an impressive level. He followed you attentively and answered you with great precision when you spoke to him. Yet, you sensed that he was ‘elsewhere’, in another dimension, in dialogue with the Other.”

He encouraged others to holiness, as in the case of his cousin Lino Palmisano, who was preparing for the priesthood: “I am very happy knowing you are already in practical training; this too will soon pass, if you know how to take advantage of the graces of the Lord that he will give you every day, to transform yourself into a Christian saint of good sense. The most satisfying studies of theology await you, which will nourish your soul with the Spirit of God, who has called you to help Jesus in His apostolate. Think not of others, but of yourself alone, of how to become a holy priest like Don Bosco. Don Bosco also said in his time: times are difficult, but we will *puf, puf*, we will go ahead even against the current. It was the heavenly mother telling him: *infirma mundi elegit Deus*. Don’t worry, I will help you. Dear brother, the heart, the soul of a holy priest in the eyes of the Lord is worth more than anything else. The day of your sacrifice together with that of Jesus on the altar is near, prepare yourself. You will never regret being generous to Jesus and to your Superiors. Trust in them, they will help you overcome the little difficulties of the day that your beautiful soul may encounter. I will remember you at Holy Mass every day, so that you too may one day offer yourself wholly to the Good Lord.”.

Conclusion

As at the beginning, so also at the end of this brief excursus on the virtuous profile of Father Convertini, here is a testimony that summarises what has been presented.

“One of the pioneer figures that struck me deeply was that of the Venerable Father Francis Convertini, a zealous apostle of Christian love who managed to bring the news of the Redemption to churches, parish areas, to the alleyways and huts of refugees and to anyone he met, consoling, advising, helping with his exquisite charity: a true witness to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, on which we shall be judged: always ready and zealous in the ministry of the sacrament of forgiveness. Christians of all denominations, Muslims and Hindus, accepted with joy and readiness the one they called the man of God. He knew how to bring to each one the true message of love, which Jesus preached and brought to this land: with evangelical direct and personal contact, for young and old, boys and girls, poor and rich, authorities and pariahs (outcasts), that is, the last and most despised rung of (sub)human refuse. For me and for many others, it was deeply emotional experience that helped me to understand and live the message of Jesus: ‘Love one another as I have loved you’.”

The last word goes to Father Francis, as a legacy he leaves to each of us. On 24 September 1973, writing to his relatives from Krishnagar, the missionary wanted

to involve them in the work for non-Christians that he had been doing with difficulty since his recent illness, but always with zeal: “After six months in hospital my health is a little weak, I feel like a broken and patched piñata. However, the merciful Jesus miraculously helps me in his work for souls. I let Him take me to the city and then return on foot, after making Jesus and our holy religion known. Having finished hearing confessions at home, I go among the pagans who are much better than some Christians. Affectionately yours in the Heart of Jesus, Father Francis.”.