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In memoriam

Xaverian biographical profiles



Fr. Carlo Girola

28 July 1948 ~ 21 October 2016

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Oltrona di San Mamette (CO – Italy)
28 July 1948

Eseka (Cameroon)
21 October 2016

«All is grace» is the conclusion of the *Diary of a country priest* (1936)¹, a novel by Georges Bernanos (1888–1948), the *romancier du surnaturel*, and it sums up the entire existence of the young priest, whose life was guided by Grace.

There is no doubt that abandonment to the sanctifying action of Grace, «the perfect gift that comes from on high»², was the red thread that characterized the entire life and work of Fr. Carlo Girola.

On 8 July 1978, he wrote to his Provincial Superior, Fr. Alfiero Ceresoli:

The gift of faith I received through Baptism, and the power of the Word of God, have led me to perceive that the Lord is calling me to respond to His

¹ Two different spiritualities converge in the novel: the spirituality of the Curé d'Arns and the spirituality of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. In a similar way to John Vianney, the young protagonist of the novel is devoured by a strong apostolic zeal and is totally dedicated to the sanctification of the flock entrusted to him. He also follows the spiritual childhood of St. Thérèse. The phrase “All is grace” with which the novel ends belongs to St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

² *Jm* 1:17.

project, which surpasses my human strength, but which I cannot refuse [...].

During the three years of my formation in the community of Desio, and thereafter with even greater intensity during the Novitiate year, I meditated upon what was going on within me regarding the profound motivations of discipleship and its external expressions in real life, and I found there every day the reasons and motivations for verifying my response [...].

Fr. Carlo was born in Oltrona di San Mamette, a small village in the province of Como, on 28 July 1947. His parents had him baptized on the same day and gave him the name of his maternal grandfather «thus linking the past and the future»³.

His family was of rural origins and was rooted in solid Catholic traditions. His father was one of the first inhabitants of the village to leave the poor earnings of agriculture behind and work in a factory, where a work related accident left him maimed and forced him to travel from one hospital to another for two years for treatment. It was a very difficult period for the family: Carlo was just seven years old.

His mother had to look after the family and the education of the three children. In an interview with Nicole Renollet, a correspondent of *Carillon Nongentais*, Fr. Carlo said: «I still wonder where she found the strength to carry on. I am very grateful to her for teaching me what it means to persevere in difficult times. She never lost the sense of God's presence in her life. I am no less grateful to my father who often said to me: "Always have the courage to be faithful". This period was a second school that taught me to give things their true value and not to become attached to material things [...]. My parents' faith was truly the school that helped me, my brother and my sister to grow».

He was also grateful to his parish community for supporting him during his young formation years that saw him work as an altar server, catechist and animator. He also recalled the contribution to his growth of the catechesis offered by Archbishop Montini (who later became Pope Paul VI) to young people, in which «he presented the Christian life as a life of daily commitment. This helped me to understand the beauty and the seriousness of the Gospel».



³ Some "biographical details" of the life of Fr. Girola are deduced from the interview he gave in December 2013 to *Carillon Nongentais*, pp. 7,11, the monthly bulletin of the parish of Saint Saturnin de Nogent-Sur-Marne – Paris.

At the end of elementary school in Oltrona San Mamette (1954–1959), Carlo Girola attended the Istituto Tecnico Professionale (1959–1962) in Lurate Caccivio (CO) and the Istituto Tecnico Industriale (1962–1965) in Como.

He obtained a diploma as a mechanical designer and began to work, at the age of sixteen, in a company that produced home appliances, first as a technician and later as a technical director. In September 2007, he wrote in *Missionari Saveriani*: «I worked for nine years in an office, during the period marked by the Protests of 1968, where my task was to design electric motors. That place of work, which I found it difficult to leave, made a great contribution to my personal growth».

Nevertheless, it was not easy for him to settled down into the new place of work, as he recalls in his own words: «I soon discovered that the workplace can give rise to jealousy and competition, often in rough ways. Fortunately, faith enabled me to face and overcome the difficulties [...]. My work and the research into the technologies excited me and taught me the value of activity, money and the duties and the rights of workers».

These were also the post-Vatican II years and Fr. Carlo, along with a group of his peers, deepened their knowledge of the Gospel and their commitment to initiatives of a social and charitable nature. In Fr. Carlo's own words: «these activities put me into contact with some missionaries who gave me a “taste” of this life, just as I was about to get engaged. I was twenty-five years old, the age at which a young man asks himself how he can give a meaning to his life. I began a quest that led me to the Xaverians. I began to experience the desire to serve the proclamation of the Gospel in the missions».

His parents accepted his decision and Fr. Carlo carefully kept a letter in which his father said to him: «I am happy that the Lord has called you to serve Him. Always have the courage to be faithful because there is nothing more authentic than perseverance in the face of the difficulties that inevitably arrive as time passes and which can undermine our will».



He joined the Xaverian Institute on 1 October 1974 in the adult vocation community of Desio (MB). After obtaining the Maturità Magistrale diploma in Monza (MB), on 14 July 1977, he began his Novitiate year in Tavernerio (CO, 1977–78). He made his First Profession on 2 September 1978 and moved to Parma to study Theology, where he made his Final Profession on 3 December 1981 and was ordained priest on 26 September 1982.

During this formation journey it was not easy for him to discover the nature of a religious congregation. In his own words: «it was necessary to combine consecrated life (of which I knew nothing), missionary life (the ori-

gin of my vocation) and preparation for the priesthood. I experienced Divine Providence which revealed itself through the formators who had the patience to accept me as I was. I have a wonderful memory of all these formation years, especially the community life and study in preparation for the Mission».

His formators agreed that Carlo Girola was committed «to detaching himself from all that might prevent him from encountering God». On 18 October 1981, he wrote a letter to the Provincial Superior, Fr. Alfiero Ceresoli, applying for admission to the Final Profession:

I am aware of just how much the Lord always surpasses me with the abundance of his gifts. This is why, in the unfathomable mystery of his call, I truly believe that He is calling me to give my life to the mission ad gentes in the Xaverian Family.

I therefore ask you to admit me to the Final Profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, in the spirit of consecration to the Church's mission in the Xaverian Family founded by Guido Maria Conforti.

Mindful of the precious nature of this moment of grace, I ask the Lord that I might not live for myself, but for the world, following the example of the One who has called me to follow him. As far as my limits allow, I wish to lose myself in the world for Christ, loving and suffering with the brothers and sisters the Lord will place on my path.

The rector of the Theology community, Fr. Luigi Zucchinelli, thus presented him to Final Profession and the Diaconate:

Carlo has a rich personality: he is intelligent and gets on easily with others; he is generous and open to the problems of the world. He also has a degree of maturity that enables him to discern and cultivate a positive critical attitude. He is balanced, available and frank.

He believes in his consecration and in the community and he is sensitive to the demands of poverty. He suffers when he sees that we do not try to live up to the demands of these values in an appropriate manner and would be prone to react, but respect for others helps him to accept and understand the situation. He has a keen sense of belonging to our Family.

Fr. Diego Pelizzari thus remembers him: «He was determined and faithful even in little things. A friend and elder brother, he was frank but patient. In the Novitiate at Tavernerio, we were all 19 years old and he was in his thirties with an experience of work behind him. He knew about real life while we were only familiar with the cloistered life of the seminary. He found it difficult in Novitiate. However, I do not remember that he ever seemed

disappointed or disenchanted. He had chosen the Xaverian missionary life, following the dream of Conforti».



In November 1983, Fr. Girola, who was then thirty-six years old, began the second stage of his existential and spiritual journey when he was assigned to the Xaverian Region of Cameroon-Chad⁴. He arrived there on 17 June 1984 and travelled overland from the airport of Douala (Cameroon) to Gounou Gaya (Ciad)⁵, his first mission. There he served as pastoral assistant from 1984 until 1988. He was also entrusted with the task of Regional Treasurer (1986–1994).

Fr. Carlo wrote about his initial experience in *Missionari Saveriani*, in September 2007: «at first, things were not easy. The place was semi-deserted, communications were slow (the mail arrived after two months); the food was very different but, above all, I found it very difficult to come to grips with the study of the *musey* language, the new lifestyles, and the pastoral method of evangelization that I had not studied. I was helped by the three confreres who had several years of experience in Africa [...]. Then I began to settle down into the rhythm of daily life. I worked with the young people of Gounou Gaya and I shared with the other three confreres reflections, planning and the catechesis: 120 villages, scattered over forty kilometers, with days of solitude in faraway places. This introduction to helped me to understand the missionary work and gave me wisdom and grace for the rest of my time in Africa. After four years at Gounou Gaya, I crossed the river Logone and moved to Bongor Sieké, which is one of the centers of the *masa* ethnic group: a new language to learn, other people and other villages to get to know. I spent nine years there, full of hard work and many initiatives, among them the catechumenate based on the memorization of the Gospels and the organization of literacy schools

⁴ On the presence of the Xaverians in Cameroon – Chad, cf. Antonio Trettel, *Camerun - Ciad. Altre terre d'Africa*, in AA.VV. *I Missionari Saveriani*, Parma 1966, 283–292.

⁵ Chad is a country in Central Africa; it extends over a vast area, but most of its territory is in the Sahara desert, whose subsoil is rich in precious minerals. Since 1982, the Xaverians have been working in the south of the country, in the Diocese of Pala. The missionary work is intense and fruitful and carried out in harmony with the plan of the local Church, “which combines an evangelization project with a plan for human, social and economic development”. Above all, the activity focuses on the first proclamation and formation of the Christian communities. The Xaverians dedicate themselves in a special way to catechists and the formation of the leaders of the various communities. They have also taken over the management of a diocesan radio station, whose programs help to develop people’s conscience in the areas of democracy, respect for human dignity, dialogue among the religions and the promotion of a culture of peace.

in the *masa* language, which I remember fondly [...]. The beginning of my missionary life was quite difficult and I sometimes thought that I would never last long in this “mission”. Yet it was there that I learned what it means to “abandon myself” to the Lord. I also reminded myself that by persevering in the difficult times, I would be fulfilling the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience».

Fr. Girola acknowledged that «obedience is undoubtedly the most difficult aspect of the life of consecrated people». In 1997, the Superiors asked him to leave Chad and work in the great metropolis of Douala, in Cameroon⁶.

He wrote to his friends and benefactors: «I am fifty years old now... and I don't feel very young! However, I accepted the decision and have discovered that obedience is always a... gain». He resided in Douala, the headquarters of the Conforti Center for Vocation Animation and missionary Formation.

His task was to follow the vocation animation of young people who showed an interest in the consecrated and missionary life: he travelled extensively by motor-bike, attending meetings in parishes, colleges and state schools. His fear that he might not be up to the demands of this work was swept away by the young people who welcomed into their world and shared their problems with him.

He told Nicole Renollet, the correspondent of *Carillon Nogentais*, «this activity with the young people was one of the most beautiful experiences of my missionary life. Animating youth groups and accompanying some of them on a vocational discernment led me to ask myself: was I proposing a true Christian life to them, which consists in listening to the call to total self-giving? This question makes me reflect constantly. Today, some of the young people I accompanied are now my confreres».

⁶ Cameroon is located in the northern part of Central Africa and is famous for its industriousness and development. Thanks to the great variety in nature and climates, it produces abundant exportable products and the subsoil is rich in raw materials. The Xaverians are present in Douala, a harbor city and headquarters of local industries; in Yaoundé, the capital; in Bafoussam, where the Conforti Center of missionary animation, missionary formation and headquarters of the philosophy school are located, and in Benakuma. They have also opened a Theology community in Yaoundé, where young Xaverians from different parts of the world train for the priesthood and missionary life in Africa. In north Cameroon the Xaverians attend to the evangelization of areas not yet reached by the Gospel. They give special attention to the formation of catechists and the leaders of Basic Christian Communities. To the west and in the south, they have given promoted village ecclesial communities. For the proclamation of the Kingdom they have adopted the “oral Tradition”, a typical African characteristic.

«I met Fr. Carlo Girola in Cameroon. He was a very cheerful person. It was a great joy when he celebrated Mass. He was always very available, very down-to-earth and affable with everyone. He never said no. He would go even if they called him out in the evening to a family with problems. Once when he was ill with tuberculosis and malaria, running a very high temperature, and he spoke and joked with everyone during the several days he spent in hospital; he attracted people to God. It was a pleasure to take part in his celebrations. [...]. I was happy to know him, we found ourselves immediately on the same wavelength and he always asked for advice on practical matters» (Fabio Pirani, father of Fr. Diego Pirani, a Xaverian missionary in Cameroon), November 2016.

On 15 August 1997, the Superior General, Fr. Francesco Marini, wrote to him:

I have heard that you are in Bafoussam and I hope everything is well with you. There is a lot to do there from a pastoral perspective, both with the committed lay people and the people in general, in the center and in the communities on the outskirts [...].

I also hope that you will succeed in the other, even more difficult, task of increasing the convergence of the spirit. It is a problem we all have to face, some more than others, at some special time in our life or after particular events. Such events can often happen for reasons beyond our control. We must not therefore feel guilty about it: it is a condition in which we must continue to live and grow.

The difficulty lies in concentrating our spirit on one thing instead of another. I believe that tranquility of spirit, the ability to make good choices and produce something solid... consists in the habit of focusing our spirit on one thing, towards which it strives or by which it is attracted.

No less demanding was the obedience requested of Fr. Girola in 2004 when he was elected Regional Superior of Cameroon-Chad (2004–2007): he was in charge of 53 confreres of every age and from eight different cultures; his task was to “accompany” them in their daily evangelical ministry and in the fulfillment of their vocation⁷.

Thus, for three years, Fr. Girola was tireless in travelling around everywhere in order to visit each one of the confreres; he always used public transport — bus or train —, because they made it easier for him to «meet people, get to know their culture, customs, lifestyle and problems».



⁷ Cf. *Constitutions*, General norms 73–74.

On 11 July 2007 Fr. Girola was elected General Councilor. He was put in charge of the Portuguese-speaking Missions, the finances of the Congregation, Missionary-Vocation Animation and the Lay Xaverian Missionaries. In his own words: «these six years in Rome gave me the opportunity to visit my confreres in Asia, Latin America, Europe and Africa. It was a great gift for me!». In connection with these years, we have the testimony of Fr. Rino Benzoni, who was the Superior General at that time:

Fr. Carlo always worked very hard. He never forgot that he had been an employee before becoming a missionary. He was scrupulous and something of a perfectionist in his work.

I remember his six years in Rome. In charge of the finances, he was “obsessed” with accuracy. He personally examined every balance sheet that was sent to him from the Regions; he made his observations known to those concerned and corresponded with them until matters were clarified [...]. He kept himself up to date on the difficult topic of the economy and became quite competent in this area [...].

He believed in relationships, but without getting absorbed by them. I don't think he ever wrote a letter just to make small talk: he always tried to express his sentiments. This created a lot of work for him, usually in the evening. He cultivated relationships with former work companions, many people from his home village or people he had got to know over the years. Our collaboration was always very correct, cordial and fraternal. We understood each other immediately because we shared the values of the mission, the consecrated life and life in general. We were very different from each other in many ways, but this made us complementary. I find it difficult to describe this because it is also a matter of speaking about myself. In any case, I believe I can say that he gave me the strength, enthusiasm and courage to keep going in the initiatives we had undertaken, while I gave him equilibrium. I helped him to see other aspects of situations and he was always grateful for this.

I remember in particular two events: the restructuring of the Chinese Museum and the Misna. There were so many meetings involved and, if he had not been there, the Museum would not have been restructured. In the case of Misna, he was the one who kept contact with the employees who had to be laid off. With his personal experience of employment, he was able to understand the employees and, with great patience, he managed to ensure that the situation was resolved to the satisfaction of all [...].

He never held back when an unpleasant situation arose [...]. He was a man open to novelty and justice. He took an interest in fair-trade, justice, ethical banking...

During the summer he would go on a walking vacation along the Way of St. James, the St. Francis Way or others: this helped him to recharge his batteries after a year of office work and, above all, to keep his ideals alive.

He always came back physically overstretched, but renewed in the spirit and ready to resume his service [...].

Fr. Girola was the contact person of the Lay Xaverian Missionaries during his time in the General Direction and they remember him as “a missionary totally in love with Jesus and people, a faithful priest, a man of relationships and a friend”. In connection with this, a married couple, Simone and Roberta, who are Lay Xaverians, told us that Fr. Carlo, after his task as “councilor” was finished, continued to share in their life in a profound way, accompanying them discretely and constantly, even from afar, rejoicing and suffering with them, asking the right questions and searching together with them for the responses. They said it was a pleasure to know him and share part of the journey with him.

At the end of his mandate, Fr. Girola spent one year (2013–14) at the Catholic Institute in Paris, where he attended an updating course on theology, Sacred Scripture, interreligious dialogue (especially with Islam) and catechesis, as a preparation for his return to Cameroon-Chad, where he arrived in September 2014. He was assigned to the Theology community in Yaoundé and entrusted with the tasks of formator, missionary animator and treasurer. He said: «I will do my best to serve the Mission and the Church».



Fr. Girola described conditions in the Mission of Cameroon in a letter: «My work leads me to travel frequently in Cameroon and Chad and the roads and the transport system are very difficult. Anything can happen to you: waiting for a train that will never arrive and no one knows why; spending two nights in a train carriage in the forest because the train travelling ahead has derailed (the railroad is a single track)».

This is what happened to him on the morning of 21 October 2016, in the vicinity of the city of Eseka: the train traveling between Yaoundé and Douala derailed, leaving 79 people dead, among them Fr. Carlo Girola, who was returning to Italy to take part in a meeting of the Congregation in Ravenna.

He had decided not to leave on his own from Yaoundé, but went first to Douala by bus and leave from there with another confrere. «A bridge had collapsed and made travel by road impossible, therefore Fr. Girola had to take the overcrowded train which then derailed ».

Fr. Modesto Tedeschi writes: «All of us remember his fraternity, cheerfulness and sincere joy with us and with the people he met in his missionary ministry.

I remember how he resolutely defended the way of living serenely our vow of poverty. He also died in radical solidarity with the poor. If he had gone by car, he would not have died that day. Perhaps the Lord could have saved him from death, leaving him wounded, but still alive. I dare to say that the true “miracle” was his solidarity with the poor to the very end».

In accordance with his own wishes, the funeral and burial took place in Cameroon. His home village of Oltrona declared a time of mourning on the day of his funeral in Cameroon.



Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his chosen ones (*Ps* 116:15).

Fr. Rino Benzoni remembers how: «on the occasion of my birthday, Fr. Carlo wrote to me late at night as usual: “To live is to sing the praises of God, even on difficult days although, thank God these are few and they leave space for better days!”. Carlo, I am sure that your last thought for the Lord, on your “dies natalis”, was an immense and grateful THANK YOU! I dedicate your own words to you, now that you are singing the praises of God, because the difficult times have passed and you are now in the light that never ends. My own gratitude to the Lord is further enriched by the pleasure of knowing you and sharing your friendship».

Fr. *Domenico Calarco* s.x.

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