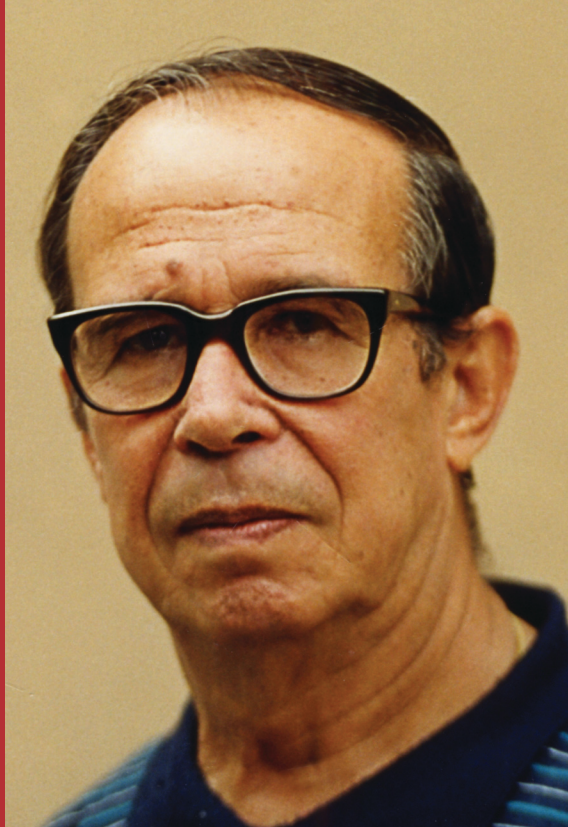


9/2017

In memoriam

Xaverian biographical profiles



Fr. Luigi Caria

16 April 1932 ~ 2 August 2017

In memoriam

Fr. Luigi Caria

Guasila (CA – ITA)
12 April 1932

Guasila (CA – ITA)
2 August 2017

The beginning of the year 1946 saw the arrival in Tortoli, in the province of Nuoro (Sardinia-Italy), of Fr. Virgilio Mirto, a native of Guasila and a professed priest of the Congregation of the Oblates of St. Joseph. He had been entrusted with the task of founding the Istituto Missionario Sardo per le Missioni Estere.

This missionary institute was officially opened on 24 November 1946 and the first ten seminarians, who hailed from different areas of Sardinia, completed the 1946–47 academic year.

Luigi Caria was one of these seminarians; he had met Fr. Mirto in Guasila, who promised to him to take him with him and, in the meantime, had given him a book to read that bore the title: “I would like to be a missionary, but...”. «After reading the book», Luigi recalled, «I, who had never heard speak of the missions, was “conquered” by Africa». He therefore joined the Istituto Missionario Sardo, where he began the first year of senior high school, which he described as “a wonderful and unforgettable year, lived in poverty but with incredible enthusiasm”.

On 15 July 1947, in the afternoon, Fr. Mirto took the boys to the nearby beach at Orri, just two kilometers from Tortolì. Two of the young lads went off on their own and were dragged away by the current.

Fr. Virgilio and his assistant dived into the water. In a few moments all the boys were brought to safety, but Fr. Virgilio drowned, leaving behind many unfulfilled dreams, but the Institute he founded did not die with him: Bishop Basoli of Lanusei, proposed to the Xaverians, who were looking for a place to initiate a presence in Sardinia, to take the students of Fr. Mirto under their wing. It was thus that Luigi began his missionary adventure with the Xaverians.

Luigi Caria was born in Guasila, in the province of Cagliari, on 16 April 1932. At the age of 15, on 15 September 1947, he asked to join the Xaverian students in Tortolì. After attending junior high school in Poggio San Marcello and senior high school in Cremona and Zelarino, he entered Novitiate in San Pietro in Vincoli (RA), in September 1951. In connection with this, he wrote to the Superior General on 11 July 1951:

Now that novitiate is drawing near, I wish to tell you something about myself and ask you to admit me to the novitiate.

I get on well with my superiors and my companions and I enjoy excellent health.

I am happy with everything, but sometimes I do feel sad when I think of the clothing I will need because my family is very poor. I trust in the Lord and hope that He can help me.

My Spiritual Director has told me that I can continue on this path with the help of the Lord. Since this advice comes from one who knows my heart, I serenely ask to be admitted to the novitiate.

I promise to pray for you and the needs of our Congregation.

After making his First Profession on 12 September 1952, he continued with the usual initial formation program: grammar school in Desio, prefect in Nizza Monferrato and Macomer, theology in Piacenza and Parma. He made his Final Profession on 5 November 1955. He was ordained priest in Parma on 25 October 1959.



On 31 October 1961 Fr. Caria set sail on a cargo ship from Genoa to Sierra Leone, West Africa, the first African mission founded by the Xaverians in July 1950, by the pioneers Azzolini, Stefani, Olivani and Serafino Calza, who set up home in the North, which was mainly inhabited by Muslims and, until then, impervious to the Gospel.

Many other confreres joined the four pioneers to work in this country, which was notorious for slave trade and known in the West as “the white man’s tomb”.

Since they were working in a mainly Muslim context, for many years the Xaverians concentrated their activity on the school, both as a social contribution towards education and as a way to proclaim the Gospel.

This was followed by various attempts to draw nearer to the warmhearted people of Sierra Leone. The confreres got involved in human promotion, opened new schools, took care of the poor, organized health assistance, promoted campaigns to fight leprosy and built up Christian communities, which were often animated by lay people who wished to take charge of their own future.

After a journey lasting twenty days, Fr. Caria arrived in Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone; this was to be his mission for the rest of his life. He took his place in the activities of the pastoral ministry and served various Christian communities during his first period in the mission (1961–96): assistant priest in Magburaka (1961–63) and Kambia (1963–65); parish priest in Mange-Bureh (1965–71; assistant priest in Yonibana (1973–79) and Magburaka (1980–92); parish priest in Waterloo (1993–96).

Fr. Caria wrote to his friends describing his pastoral activity in the mission of Kambia:

I spent a lot of time in Rokupr, a large village on the banks of the Great Scarcies river, twenty kilometers from Kambia. I have recently finished visiting and blessing all the families and this helped us to get to know each other.

This is how the visit is carried out: the Christians are informed of the missionary’s arrival on the previous Sunday during community prayer. I arrive in the house along with the catechist. After greetings, we begin to speak about the situation of the family, the children, the relationship with the community and various problems.

This is how I discover who is baptized and who isn’t; I also find out which children need to be prepared for Communion or Confirmation. Are there any family members who wish to join the catechumenate and prepare for baptism? Are there any marriages that have been celebrated according to traditional customs and need to be blessed by the sacrament?

We must always bear in mind that entirely Christian families are rare: the grandfather or the grandmother could be Muslims, or followers of the traditional religion. Other times, the mother is Catholic and the father Protestant...There is a little of everything.

After a conversation, we pray together; I read a passage from the Gospel and give the Easter blessing...even if Easter was a long time ago. For Christians, in any case, it is always Easter, always time to resurrect!

In the meantime, with the parish Council I have prepared a pastoral plan for the coming season. We have decided to set up some prayer groups in the villages around Rokupr.

There is a lot of work to be done and a lot of good will to do it. I am sure that the Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary will help us [...]. Only after two years was I able to acquire a Vespa to help me move from village to village and carry out the role of school educator.

Some confreres, who shared the mission with Luigi, sent some precious testimonies on his figure and his work:

Fr. Luigi and I were together for his last period in Sierra Leone. He surpassed me for the number of years he worked in Sierra Leone and for his experience in many fields of missionary life.

He was good and patient with everyone (especially with people who were overlooked because of their poverty); Fr. Luigi received them as important guests, took them into his office and listened to them with great kindness, sharing their poverty and suffering. He helped them as far as he could. He was good with young people and children. In community life, he, who was the eldest, loved to serve the others (*Fr. Franco Manganello*).

The mission of Lungi is about one hundred meters from the sea. In past years, Bishop Azzolini advised those doing evangelization work in the country to take fifteen days vacation in Lungi.

I met Fr. Luigi during my first vacation in Lungi. Every morning, we would go down to the beach where hundreds of fishermen were pulling in their nets full of fish: it was a very biblical scene that took us back to the times of Jesus.

Fr. Luigi was already a “veteran” of the mission in Sierra Leone, whilst I had only been there for a few years; I therefore looked to him as someone who could teach me about the mission and its demands. He was no longer up to date with missiology studies, but he was a man of great missionary experience.

During those long walks along the beach, I came to admire his humble and tenacious missionary zeal. He had already “invested” a great part of his life in the Mission and his vision of the missionary work helped me a great deal: it was almost an “accelerated” course on the mission on the banks of the river!

One morning, Fr. Luigi said to me that if our missionary activity is rooted in the Gospel, then it is a blessing, otherwise it becomes a curse. After a long silence, he added: “It not death that frightens me, but a life

without meaning". He then paraphrased the great painter, Vincent Van Gogh: "I feel rich, but not in financial terms. I am rich because in my missionary work I have found Someone to whom I can dedicate my whole heart; Someone who gives meaning and inspiration to my entire missionary and religious life: Jesus Christ, the Missionary of the Father" (*Fr. Tony Senno*).



In 1996 Fr. Caria was assigned to Lungi as rector of the Mission house. There he experienced first-hand the tragedy of the terrible civil war (1998–2001) that was unleashed by the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front, and which caused upheaval in Sierra Leone, leaving more than 200.000 people dead.

The tension and instability was heightened also by huge local financial interests that were connected with the mineral resources, involving not only local political organizations, but also neighboring countries and some foreign multinationals.

Fr. Vito Scagliuso writes: «During the civil war and the Ebola outbreak, which lasted two years, Fr. Luigi showed great kindness and attention to the marginalized and to those who did not obtain any help from organized groups of assistance [...]».

In the meantime, Fr. Caria wrote: «The war has caused great harm. All of us, the missionaries, are committed to rebuilding the social fabric of the population, to give back some hope and trust, to repair the houses, schools and churches. We are trying to reunite families torn apart by the civil war. We are also doing everything we can to educate the young people in the schools. The secondary school of Kolenten, in the district of Kambia, already has 800 students; another 600 students have applied for admission but we can only take 200 because we do not have enough space. In the primary schools we have boys and girls who should be in secondary school, but the war has prevented them from attending. Some students already have a wife! We pay the school fees of the poorest children to keep them in education. I thank the Lord for the gift of life and ask Him to keep me in good health so that I can work for His glory».

On the 50th anniversary of his priestly ordination, Fr. Caria wrote to the Superior General: «Thank you for remembering my 50th anniversary of ordination. I apologize for replying so late, but I was in hospital for three weeks. Things are going very well now [...]. What can I tell you about this anniversary? I am confused: I see the many graces I have received from Jesus and Our Blessed Lady and my excessive infidelity! I believe in their mercy. My heart is full of joy when I realize just how much God has loved me despite my poverty».

In the meantime, in 2012, a sudden illness, from which he recovered, and his age forced him to return to Italy. Assigned to the Italian Region, Fr. Caria served in the ministry and missionary animation in Macomer (2012–15) and Cagliari (2015–17).

Fr. Gianni Zampini, the rector of the Cagliari house, remembers him as «a perfect “adventure” companion. He enthusiastically embraced every proposal, he was always willing to travel to meet the young people and benefactors. Our journeys by car were always precious moments of sharing, prayer and...chats, in the simple and adaptive style that distinguished him, despite the passing of the years».

Fr. Luigi Caria left this earth on 2 August 2017. There is no doubt that sister death was for him, as for St. Francis of Assisi, «“the sister” who takes us by the hand and leads us to the love from whence we came».

Fr. Domenico Calarco SX

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