10/2017

In memoriam

Xaverian biographical profiles

Fr. Giovanni Casonato

30 August 1938 ~ 7 August 2017

Fr. Giovanni Casonato

San Martino di Lupari (PD – ITA)
30 August 1938

Vicenza (ITA)
7 August 2017

On 4 August 1954, Giovanni Casonato wrote to the rector of the junior seminary in Pedrengo, in the province of Bergamo: «I ask you to accept me as a student in your Institute. Please believe me, Father, I truly wish to become a priest and a missionary.

They keep telling me to change my mind because I have no desire to do anything. But if I followed this advice I would be disoriented.

They tell me I struggle to learn things, but I have great trust in the help of God and the help of the Institute that I wish to join.

Hoping that my application will be accepted, I will continue to ask the Lord to grant me the grace to fulfill my dream».

Giovanni Casonato was born in S. Martino di Lupari, in the province of Padua, on 30 August 1938. At the age of sixteen, in September 1954, he joined the minor seminary of Pedrengo, where he attended junior and senior high school. He entered novitiate in S. Pietro in Vincoli on 2 October 1959, where he remained for one year. On 26 August 1960, he wrote to the Superior General:

> I, Giovanni Casonato, having reached the end of novitiate, and with a deep desire to consecrate myself to the service of God, ask you to admit me to religious profession after receiving the consent of the novice master and my confessor.
>
> I ask you to grant my request and to accept my sincere greetings. Please bless me.

After his First profession on 3 October 1960, Giovanni continued with the usual initial formation program: grammar school in Desio (MB), introductory year and theology in Parma, where he was ordained priest on 15 October 1967. He had made the Final Profession on 12 September 1965 as his loving response to God's call. Regarding his admission to the Order of Priesthood, he had written to the Superior General on 26 June 1967: «With deep gratitude to the Lord and Our Blessed Lady, aware of the step I am about to take and the responsibilities that await me, I dare to ask you to admit me to the Order of Priesthood. I take this step even though I am aware of my great unworthiness, but I trust entirely in the Lord».

In September 1968 he was entrusted with the task of assistant treasurer in the Parma Theology community (1968–69): a job that he carried out as a "useless servant" (cf. *Lk* 17:10), namely, "not for a prize or as a punishment, like children do, but freely and out of love".

Just one year later, in October 1969, he was assigned to the mission of Indonesia.

> «With its numerous islands, Indonesia is made up of various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. The Javanese group is the largest and dominating ethnic group.
>
> As a nation, Indonesia has developed a shared identity based on a national language, an ethnic diversity and a religious pluralism within a population the majority of which is Muslim, and a history of colonialism and rebellion against it.
>
> The Indonesian national anthem is emblematic in this sense: *Bhinneka tunggal ika* ("Unity in diversity"). Nevertheless factious tensions and separatism have led to violent clashes that have sometimes compromised the political and economic stability [...]
>
> Even though the Indonesian Constitution makes room for religious liberty, the government officially recognizes only six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism».

Expelled from China in 1951, eight Xaverian Missionaries headed for Indonesia, where they settled in Sumatra, one of the largest islands. The work entrusted to the Xaverians extended to over 133,000 square kilometers, with three and a half million inhabitants.

Only two thousand of these people were baptized: it was practically a mission beginning from scratch. Ten years later, the mission already had 9,300 Catholics, about thirty nuns, three dispensaries and two small hospitals.

As soon as he acquired a sufficient degree of competence in the Indonesian language, Fr. Casonato began to work in the ministry: assistant priest in Kayu Aro (1971–74), Dumai (1975–80), Kota Baru (1981–82), Kayu Aro (1982–83), Jakarta "Stella Maris" (1983–89), Sawalunto (1990–91), Padang "Santa Maria" (1991–93), Bukittinggi (1994–95), Padang "Santa Maria" (995–97) and Padang Baru (1999–2003).

To judge from the little material we have, it seems clear that the hard-working pastoral activity of Casonato in Indonesia was characterized by his fidelity to this teaching of Jesus: «So with you: when you have done all you have been told to do, say, We are useless servants; we have done no more than our duty» (*Lk* 17:10).

There is no doubt that «illness is awkward, a friend, a terrible and jealous spouse that never abandons us and which obliges us to consider even death».

In March 2003, Fr. Casonato had problems with his lungs and left Indonesia and returned to Italy. He went directly to Vicenza to his family home in order to consult some specialists.

The treatment he received improved his condition to the extent that it was thought he could return quickly to Indonesia; on the one hand, the government had given him permission to be absent from Indonesia for six months and, on the other, he was convinced he could find suitable medicines in Indonesia now that he knew what his problem was.

The doctors asked him to wait two more months before returning to Indonesia to avoid infections and continue with some medical check-ups.

For the last weeks of his stay in Italy he decided to remain at home with his family.

In October 2003, Fr. Casonato was taken back into hospital with a serious pulmonary hemorrhage, which resulted in the loss of 5 % of his respiratory capacity. He underwent surgery for the removal of the damaged part of his lung.

Fr. Casonato then decided to go to Parma and receive treatment at the Mother House. He remained there until the end of October 2004, when

the General Direction assigned him to the Italian Region, after reflecting at length on his health situation and the advice given by the doctors; they left open the possibility of a return to Indonesia, provided his health improved.

In connection with this, a General Council, Fr. J. Guadalupe Robledo Sánchez, wrote to him:

> Your new assignment will certainly have an emotional impact upon you, after 33 years of missionary service to the Indonesian Church, its people and the families that became your own family. We are grateful for your service to the Mission and your life witness, along with the many people who found in you light, faith and a word of comfort and encouragement. The Lord will reward you for your efforts.
>
> This new stage of your life will be equally meaningful, albeit in a different manner. For us missionaries, "sickness, when accepted in faith, is also a moment of grace and an instrument of salvation" (RMX 96).

In December 2004 Fr. Casonato was assigned to the community of Vicenza, where he served in the pastoral ministry and missionary animation. He died on 7 August 2017, in the Vicenza hospital.

Fr. Giovanni Casonato — the man, the religious, the missionary — would have undoubtedly made his own the words written by the Abbé Pierre about his own death:

> For me death is not a separation but a continuation. It is not an end, but a renewal. It is like emerging from the shadows into the light [...]. It is an encounter with a friend, who has kept us waiting for too long for his arrival, a wonderful and amazing encounter with the Infinite, with the Eternal, with Love.

Fr. Domenico Calarco SX

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