

Conforti: Early Years and Priestly Formation



Guido Conforti was the eighth of ten children of Rinaldo Conforti and Antonia Adorni. He was born on March 30 1865 at Casalora di Ravadese, in the midst of a fertile land of Parma, Italy. All the educational efforts undertaken by his parents geared toward a specific goal, dreamed by his father: to have his son be the future administrator of the farm and its properties.

Guido attended the school of the Christian Brothers in Parma, and he could have very well been a successful manager. On the way to school, Guido developed the habit to stop in prayer in front of a huge Crucifix in the Church of Peace. There was an intense conversation among the two of them: *'I looked at Him, and He looked at me, and it seemed he was telling me many things'* used to retell later Guido Conforti when he became

bishop. In that meeting with the Crucifix, Guido felt called to the priesthood.

We can just imagine the opposition of his father Rinaldo when Guido shared the news of entering the local seminary. But through the support he found in his mother, and the strength he received from his daily dialogues with the Crucifix, Guido seemed very determined.

While in the Seminary, Guido lived an austere life, detached from his natural family, for seldom he received visits from his parents. But he was also experiencing some nervous related illness. He would pass out for a few hours, and he seemed out of breath. This almost precluded his priesthood ordination. His classmates would be ordained, but Guido was asked to wait, and get better.

Guido made trips to the local shrine of Our Lady of Fontanellato, guided by the wisdom he received from Blessed Anna Maria Adorni, a holy religious woman who lived in Parma. Blessed Adorni was considered *"the mother of the marginalized, exploited, of all who are subject to new forms of slavery and, in particular, of the incarcerated and women."*

Our Lady gave Guido Conforti the strength to endure those difficult months, and he finally received the

grace of Ordination to the Priesthood. His first Mass was at the Shrine of Our Lady at Fontanellato, on September 22, 1888. This 23-year-old priest was becoming aware of a new call in life: the founding of a community totally dedicated to the mission of Christ.

The Crucifix Encounter:

The Source of My Vocation

I looked at him, and he looked at me, and it seemed as though he was telling me many things

God revealed the fullness of his love in his Crucified Son. One day this love touched the heart of young Guido Conforti in an almost natural way. He was but a child. Every morning, he stopped at the "Church of Peace" to gaze at the the large Crucifix there.

This was the beginning of an uninterrupted dialogue with Christ crucified. Later when he was sixty years old and bishop, his sister often found him rapt in ecstasy before that crucifix, which had been brought to his residence, at his request. Was it that dialogue with the Crucified Lord that sparked the idea to found a missionary congregation?



I looked at him, and he looked at me, and it seemed as though he was telling me many things

Brief Life

March 30, 1865 - Guido Maria Conforti is born at Casalora di Ravadese (Parma), Italy.

- 1872-1876 - While attending elementary school in Parma he has his first prayer conversations with Christ crucified. He used to recall: "He gave me my vocation" and "it seemed like he told me many things."
- 1879-1881 - After reading the life of St. Francis Xavier he adopts him as a model.
- September 22, 1888 - He is ordained priest.
- December 3, 1895 - He begins, in Emilia, his "Seminary for the Foreign Missions."
- December 3, 1898 - His seminary, in Emilia, is officially recognized as the "St. Francis Congregation for the Foreign Missions."
- March 3, 1899 - In the Mission Seminary Chapel he bids farewell to the first Xaverians leaving for China, Caio Rastelli and Odoardo Manini.
- June 11, 1902 - In St. Paul's Basilica in Rome, Monsignor Conforti definitively consecrates himself to mission by professing religious vows. He is then consecrated bishop of the Archdiocese of Ravenna.
- December 12, 1907 - He becomes bishop of Parma.
- April 21, 1912 - In the Cathedral of Parma he consecrates Mons. Luigi Calza first Xaverian Bishop and Vicar Apostolic of Cheng-chow (China).
- August 15, 1921 - He finishes writing his "Testament Letter" with which he presents the Xaverian Constitutions to the Xaverian members, approved by Rome.
- September-December 1928 - Notwithstanding his illness and age, he visits his missionaries in China.
- November 5, 1931 - Guido Maria Conforti dies a saintly death in Parma.
- On March 17, 1996 Guido Maria Conforti is declared BLESSED by Pope John Paul II
- October 23, 2011 - Guido Maria Conforti is proclaimed SAINT by Pope Benedict XVI.

Archbishop of Ravenna, ready to do God's will

In May of 1902, Conforti was named Bishop of Ravenna by Pope Leo XIII. It could have been a deadly blow to Conforti and his newly born congregation. In his conversation with the Pope, Conforti shared his dream of going to China, and the Pope told him that his field of work was Ravenna, "the China of Italy." The Pope continued: "I summoned you to Rome in person so that you could hear from the mouth of the Pontiff himself what he asks of you. So be ready to do the will of God and He will give you the grace necessary for the fulfillment of His plan."



On June 11th, 1902 at St. Paul Church outside the Walls in Rome, Guido was consecrated Bishop. He also made his religious profession together with the vow to dedicate himself without reserve to the proclamation of the Gospel "ad gentes." This assignment proved to be a Way of the Cross.

Bishop Conforti arrived in Ravenna with a plan of action. He saw ignorance of the faith as the major problem in the diocese. His was a plan of education and catechesis, parish visits and encouragement for the local clergy and seminarians. He challenged priests and seminarians to lead deep spiritual lives. It was a renewal movement for all. This plan was not always met with kindness... At times people and clergy reacted with coldness and hostility.

But after two years in that diocese, Conforti's physical stamina weakened tremendously. He resigned after the counsel of doctors. On October 6, 1904 Pius X accepted his resignation on health grounds. He retired to Parma and his congregation where he dedicated his energies to the formation of his young candidates to missionary life and to the drafting of the Constitutions of the Xaverian missionaries.

He wrote to his friend and confidant, Cardinal Andrea Ferrari of Milan: "*I just ask to retire in the solitude of my seminary, among the brothers of my missionary community. I will commit the rest of my few days in life to these young students, who are longing for the victories of faith and of martyrdom.*"



Giuseppe Brambilla - Antonio Sartori - Luigi Calza - Giovanni Bonardi Jan. 18, 1904

His return to Parma was not a welcomed sight. Conforti took this retirement as a humbling experience. Yet, he also saw in this failure the visible hand of God, who was providing him with time to get better, and the possibility to better establish his congregation. He sent to China the first group of missionaries in 1904, and among them, Fr. Louis Calza, the future bishop of Cheng Chow.

In the ceremony of the giving of the Crucifix, Conforti said: *"The Crucifix is the master-book from which saints were made, and from which we also must be formed. All the teachings found in the Gospel are exemplified in the Crucifix."* He was talking from his personal life. It seemed that no one in China wanted to accept his missionaries, unless they would join a different congregation. Conforti suffered a lot because of this lack of trust in the energies of his new congregation.

For Conforti, religious life would complement the missionary life. *"Faith and the Gospel assure us that the missionary life, joined to the profession of religious vows, represents the greatest calling found within the church."* Bishop Conforti could see that religious life was the most concrete and attracting way of witnessing the message of Christ to those who were called to found new Christian communities.

Bishop of Parma, but Missionary to the World

The hand of fate, or the inspiration of the Spirit was to again enter the life of Guido: in December of 1907, Guido became bishop of Parma, following the death of Bishop Magani. Bishop Conforti adopted *In Omnibus Christi* (Christ in all things) as his motto, and the Xaverians would later adopt it as well. It was to be put to practical application in his pastoral visits throughout the diocese. For almost 25 years he was the good shepherd of his flock, a living sign of the maternal concern that the Church shows towards all, whether they belong to the Church or otherwise, paying special attention to the poor and the weakest among them.



As with Ravenna, religious instruction was the priority of his pastoral agenda: he founded schools of Christian doctrine in all parishes and prepared catechists with appropriate courses in pedagogical and religious culture. He was the first in Italy to celebrate a catechetical week.

On five occasions Bishop Conforti carried out a full pastoral visit of his diocese, he celebrated two diocesan synods, and founded and promoted Catholic Action, giving special attention to the youth branch. He cultivated in a particular way the cultural preparation and holiness of his priests, the formation of lay people, catholic associations, a good quality press, popular missions, and Eucharistic, Marian and Missionary Congresses.

He brought about reconciliation where there was division, and strove to bring back to the fold those who had strayed. Moved by a deep and personal love, he instilled in people an attitude of respect for the Pope.

His presence in the most difficult moments in the history of Parma, though discrete and almost unnoticed, was resolute and effective, especially during the strikes in 1908 which were followed by the formation of a committee of lawyers for the defense of the rights of farmers and priests. The workers suffered low wages, long hours and atrocious and dangerous working conditions. He was known to support the workers because he saw that as his Christian duty in fighting for justice and social peace. At the same time he urged the wealthy to be more just in distributing their wealth.

Yet, he strongly opposed and condemned those who sought their end through violent acts. Conforti was never a spectator in these events that affected his brothers and sisters; he fought for the politics of the

Gospel that is an end to hatred, division and violence.

During the First World War Guido put all at his disposal to helping prisoners of war, children and families that had lost their bread winner, he visited the wounded, he comforted the bereaved, took care of those displaced by the war. He made sure that his seminarians, both diocesan and Xaverian helped in the hospitals that were erected. At the end of the War Bishop Conforti held a service of thanksgiving in the cathedral.

He also played an important part in the resistance to fascism put up by a part of the city. The fascist troops withdrew from Parma on the day after Bishop Conforti had offered to mediate in the conflict. As a result of this, the threat of a civil war was avoided.

A newly ordained priest, who sought the guidance of Bishop Conforti was Fr. Giuseppe Roncalli, in the future Pope John XXIII. "I sought the advice of Bishop Guido Maria Conforti — he once said — for he was the most illuminating bishop in Italy of that missionary movement, which had started after the encyclical of pope Benedict XV, 'Maximum Illud.' I sought Bishop Conforti for in him I found a person who brought together the sacred ministry of caring for souls found in bishops and missionaries: Bishop of Parma, but Missionary for the world."

The Love of God's People

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Bishop Conforti dedicated a lot of time in prayer, even though he was not a monk. In the serenity of that "nest of eagles," as he used to call his community, and with the fresh air of his native Parma, he regained his strength. On September 16, 1907 Pope Pius X sent Conforti a letter, asking him to become collaborator of the dying bishop of Parma, Bishop Magani. The Pope began his letter with these words: "It's two of us who are asking you this great favor, a service to be accepted at any cost and personal sacrifice." It was a request from both the Pope and the Bishop of Parma, and Conforti accepted with the words "On the tomb of the Apostles, I now vow to die on the Cross."



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Bishop Conforti arrives in Berceto in 1931 for a pastoral visit

Bishop Magani died soon after, and Conforti was a “missionary in his land,” ready to combat battles from many fronts. His heart was saddened by the departure of many priests of the diocese. There was social rebellion in Parma, with known anti-clericalism, which undermined the spiritual and social growth of the city and surrounding farming communities. Bishop Conforti found himself trying to fight religious ignorance and indifference, with a gentle yet firm hand. It was his first pastoral priority.

Once, during a pastoral visit, as he was having dinner with one of his priests, Bishop Conforti said to the priest: “Most Reverend Pastor, what a big difference between this table cloth and the altar cloth. And yet, on the altar we feed ourselves of the Body of Christ, while here we eat only earthly food!”

Because of his closeness to his priests and his people, because of his many confessions and homilies, and because of his many visits to the sick, the dying, and those in prison, Conforti’s fatherly love reached out to many. He told his secretary, as he was coming home from a mountain village: *“Every pastoral visit reminds me of being a missionary! How hard it is to be heading home!”*

In many occasions, Conforti would find a group of poor beggars on the steps of the Cathedral or in front of his house. It was the harsh reality of a city divided in two, by the river. Those who lived across the river were poor families, searching for their daily bread. And those on this side, affluent people, yet looking for their own good. There was a Franciscan friar, Fr. Lino, true man of charity, who encouraged the rich of the city for the need of change in their lifestyle, and to consider the plights of the poor in their city. They had become complacent in their ways, who thought of themselves as socially advanced, while forgetting that they were first of all Christians. It was the height of social hypocrisy, atheistic thought, social materialism, all of which created an abyss of insensitivity and mistrust among the people.

Urged by a true missionary spirit, Bishop Conforti tried to bring peace among them, and to bring the Gospel deeply in those fertile and generous souls. He used to say: *“They are not bad people, but ignorance abounds among them. We need to bring them a piece of bread wrapped in a page of the catechism.”* Bishop Conforti was a pioneer in teaching the Christian religion in a systematic way. He also thought about a liturgical reform, for he saw how his *“people are strangers to the Eucharistic Celebration.”*

Bishop Conforti wrote a vast archive of letters and documents during his years in Parma, which showed the wide scope of pastoral activities and the many relationships he established in different fields, with the sole purpose of extending the Reign of God. *“Faith has always been the norm of my life and thought. This faith, I have always desired to proclaim, the faith of the apostles, the faith of the Church.”*

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President of the Missionary Union of the Clergy



Bishop Conforti's concern for the Church entrusted to him never distracted him from the “concern for those parts of the world where the Word of God had not yet been proclaimed.” He was convinced that the proclamation of the Gospel “*ad gentes*” (to the nations), was the most effective way of re-evangelizing his own people. He was untiring, therefore, in his commitment to mission evangelization and promotion, both through the work of his own missionary family, as well as supporting every missionary animation initiative in Italy and throughout the world.

He was particularly committed to assisting in the foundation and spreading of the Pontifical Missionary Union of the Clergy of which he was the first president. In fact, in 1916 Guido Conforti got together with Fr Paolo Manna of the Pontifical Institute of Milan Missionary Society. The idea was to mobilize priests around the world to reawaken their awareness of having been ordained for the whole world and encourage them to heighten their people's commitment to spreading the Gospel. It was to be another legacy to the mission of the Church.

The Bishop of Parma was almost like a magnet to those who felt the urgency of missionary formation of the people of God. The missionary heart of Fr. Manna, founder of PIME missionaries, had the intuition that only through the personal conversion of priests and bishops to the universal mission of the church, he could hope for a missionary re-launching. Bishop Conforti joined wholeheartedly the Missionary Union of the Clergy and helped organize and attended Mission Congresses throughout Italy: in Bergamo (1919, 1923), Rome (1920), Naples (1922), Modena (1923), and in particular in Palermo (1924) when he gave the key-note address on “*The Eucharist and the Missions.*”

When Conforti retired from the Missionary Union of Clergy in 1927 as its first national president, the association was present in 44 Italian dioceses alone. It formed a cultural magazine Missionary Studies that had great success. Bishop Conforti constantly asked the Pope for an encyclical that dealt with the mission of the Church and just after the First World War Benedict XV produced “*Maximum Illud*” that called for local clergy and re-awakened missionary awareness and collaboration.

“It was providential that Fr. Paolo Manna had the support of the holy Bishop Conforti at the time of the foundation of the Missionary Union of the Clergy. Conforti not only offered valuable advice and help to

the Union in its infancy stages; he also used his authority to ensure that it gained papal approval” (Paul VI).

Bishop of Parma, but Missionary to the World

"I find everywhere the holy enthusiasm to spread the Gospel"

If the activities of Bishop Conforti were seen carefully by many people and bishops of Italy. What most impressed everyone was his ability to balance his total service to his local church and his passionate spirit for the universal church.

Bishop Conforti was sure that the Church needed to renew itself in order to bring more concrete answers to its ministry and its mission in the world. He even wrote to Pope Pius XI with the request of declaring a Council of the Church. In his letter, Bishop Conforti notes the motivations for a gathering of this magnitude, prophetic ideas for those times: *"There are questions of moral, social and international aspects to be answered. There is the necessity to look into the status of the Eastern Churches, who see opportune to come back to the center of the Catholic unity. And I find everywhere the holy enthusiasm in clergy and laity to spread the Gospel..."*



Guido Conforti, Bishop of Parma:
"I now vow to die on the Cross"

The Bishop of Parma was almost like a magnet to those who felt the urgency of missionary formation of the people of God. The missionary heart of Fr. Manna, founder of PIME missionaries, had the intuition that only through the personal conversion of priests and bishops to the universal mission of the church, he could hope for a missionary re-launching. At that time, it meant calling forth of new apostles to Asia, Africa and the Pacific Islands. Bishop Conforti joined wholeheartedly the Missionary Union of the Clergy and became its most active president, which had members throughout Italy.

Among these, a newly ordained priest, who sought the guidance of Bishop Conforti. His name was *Giuseppe Roncalli*, in the future *Pope John XXIII*. *"I sought the advice of Bishop Guido Maria Conforti — he once said as a Pope — for he was the most illuminating bishop in Italy of that missionary movement, which had started after the encyclical of Pope Benedict XV, "Maximum Illud." I sought Bishop Conforti for in*



The future Pope John XXIII



"I find everywhere the holy enthusiasm to spread the Gospel"

him I found a person who brought together the sacred ministry of caring for souls found in bishops and missionaries: Bishop of Parma, but Missionary for the world."

Even though he was founder of his Congregation, Bishop Conforti saw himself as a useless servant. Learning from Jesus on the Cross, he vowed to live his life as a faith journey. He was called to love, to suffer, to work with Christ and for Christ. The Xaverian community had to become a living monument of Redeeming Christ, and so call all Christians to their missionary duty.

Knowing how important was the press and the advent of cinema in society, Bishop Conforti wished that his missionaries would use these means for their ministry and apostolate. He established a missionary periodical called *"Faith and Civilization"* which expressed his human Christianity.

Today, we would talk about *"evangelization and human development."*

Visit to China and Death of a Saint



One last significant event in Conforti's life was his journey to China, which he undertook *"as a duty and a need of my heart."* Notwithstanding his ability to deal with missionary problems as a founder of a missionary congregation and president of the Missionary Union of the Clergy, he recognized that this trip would help him appreciate more the mission service and dimension of the church.

China gave him a new sense of the vastness of its territory: *"We don't need 3,000 missionaries in China, but 50,000!... I'll look forward to that day when the whole of China will be called a Christian nation!"* Before leaving China, Bishop Conforti addressed his missionaries by saying, *"I hope that my visit will bring great good, deepen our love, and give all of us greater*

encouragement to work willingly and constantly for the missions... I'm amazed at what you have accomplished for the good of these Chinese people. How I would like to be young again, and dedicate all my energies to them!"

Conforti's missionary plan was rooted on the look of Christ, and its many fruits. One of these fruits is the "forming of one single family that embraces the whole world." Indeed, his trip to China was a strong sign of communion among the sending and receiving Churches.



In spite of orders to rest, he began a final pastoral visit to the parishes of Parma, speaking time and again of his visit to China. These were to be his last visits. They drained his energy and still refused to take things at a slower pace. On October 25, 1931 he ordained eight sub-deacons and then was forced to bed feeling exhausted.

On November 5 1931, worn out by his work and apostolic activity, having received the Sacrament of the sick and Eucharist, and following a public profession of his own personal faith, Guido Maria Giuseppe Conforti implored God's blessings on his priests and people, and died in the peace of the Lord.

He was buried on November 8, and a procession stretching five miles followed him to his resting place. Monsignor

Cazzani asked rhetorically in his eulogy: *“Is this the funeral of a man fallen under the scythe of death or the triumph of a saint exalted to the glory of heaven.”*

Throughout his life Guido Maria Conforti was consumed two elements that live together: the Gospel and mission. He has been accredited as being one of the major contributors to the reawakening of mission in the last century. He may not have performed miracles or cures, yet he helped create a sense of hope: hope that our human family could become “One in Christ.”



His Holiness John Paul II proclaimed Bishop Conforti *“venerable”* on February 11, 1982, and on March 17, 1996 Pope John Paul II declared him (and Bishop Daniel Comboni, founder of a religious missionary community) *“blessed,”* at a celebration at St. Peter attended by thousands of pilgrims from all over the world. The prayers, the songs, the gifts and the dances from each continent during the Beatification ceremony represented that final vision of Conforti. He was proclaimed a Saint for the universal Church on October 23, 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI.

Today, the Universal Church gives thanks to God for the gift of a missionary bishop who lived the missionary spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

A Much-Needed Ecumenical Council

By Fr. Giulio Barsotti, SX (former Postulator for the Cause of Bishop Guido Conforti)

In a letter of 1925, Guido M. Conforti shares his opinions and encourages Pope Pius X to consider a possible Ecumenical Council for the Church. Could these dreams be prophetic, 60 years before the celebration of Vatican Council II?

Conforti's deeds and activities were not only geared towards his soul or the vineyard given to him, but they reached out to the entire flock of Christ. No one can say that Conforti lived under the shadow of his Cathedral because of his spiritual shortsightedness. In his homilies and letters, he was not only concerned with Parma and his diocese, or with the entire Italian concerns of the Church. He was universal in his approach of ideas and practices.

In his heart, he felt the need expressed by St. Paul in the letter to Corinth: "there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2Cor. 11:28), and prayed for the well being of the Church at large "so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles,... [without] immediately consulting flesh and blood." (Gal. 1:16)

Many people and bishops of Italy saw all the activities of Bishop Conforti carefully. What most impressed everyone was his ability to balance his total service to his local church and his passionate spirit for the universal church.



A Much-Needed Ecumenical Council, predicted 40 years before

The Mission Exposition in 1925

It is significant his participation to the "mission exposition" in Rome during the Holy Year 1925, willed and organized by Pope Pius XI in the Vatican grounds. The mission gathering showed a panoramic view of the presence and vitality of the universal Church.

Conforti brought his contribution to this page of history, with his enthusiasm and unconditional support and praise for this missionary initiative, by inviting and involving the faithful and priests to collaborate.

Conforti had already done a lot of work on behalf of the universal church and to prepare the soil for mission events such as these. As the president of the Missionary Union of the Clergy, and founder and general superior of the Xaverians, Conforti invited also his missionaries in China to do their utmost best

to collaborate for the success of the Mission Exposition in Rome. The China missions were well represented, with objects from the Chinese museum at Parma's Motherhouse, given to the Supreme Pontiff as a sign of Conforti's love for the Holy Father and the universal character of the Spouse of Christ, instrument of missionary education and activity. Conforti visited the various displays with personal interest and much delight.

Letter on the Ecumenical Council

Even more interesting, on the matter of the universality of the church and the celebration of the Holy Year 1925, was the response of Bishop Guido Conforti to the Pope on a possible gathering of an Ecumenical Council. In his letter, Bishop Conforti notes the motivations for a gathering of this magnitude; indeed prophetic ideas for those times.

Conforti wrote a letter to the Holy Father "in Latin" on June 24, 1925, in which he shares this longing of his heart and the praise of an Ecumenical event such as a Council in the Church. *"It is a wonderful initiative – he writes – which will be beneficial to the universal church."*

Soon after the initial remarks of praise, Bishop Conforti puts down a number of reasons why an Ecumenical Council should take place – some 50 years before Vatican II!

First, it would be of great advantage to the Holy See and its status among the nations. Second, it would provide a renewed awakening of the religious aspect in the whole world, especially soon after the immense and bloody World War which caused a lot of damage in all aspects of life. Third, there are questions of moral, social and international aspects to be answered, in the light of the revealed truth of the Gospel. Fourth, there is the need to invite all Christians to religious discipline, so that all may see in the figure of the Holy Father *"the head and guide, of whom we already admire his strength and clear wisdom."* Fifth, there is the urgency to understand our relationship with other Christian denominations, especially our status with the Eastern Churches, who *"seem to see opportune to come back to the center of the Catholic unity"*; they would *"welcome a Council with a serene heart, full of hope."* Finally, there is a need to bring the entire Church back to his missionary dimension, for *"I find everywhere the holy enthusiasm in clergy and laity to spread the Gospel."*

For all of these reasons, Conforti believes and states: *"the advantages of the convocation of an Ecumenical Council, to be celebrated in Rome near the see of the Vicar of Christ, would be indeed innumerable to the Church and to the religious issues of our time."* Therefore *"the non-surmountable difficulties, which can be encountered in a gathering of such magnitude, cannot stifle such an arduous initiative."* He firmly believes and wishes that *"this Council would come soon"* and prays to God so that *"from this new event in the world, the entire Church spread around the world would become enlightened with glory and praise."*

Bishop Conforti was sure that the Church needed to renew itself in order to bring more concrete answers to its ministry and its mission in the world. Today, the Universal church gives thanks to God for the gift of a missionary bishop who lived the missionary spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

St. John XXIII when he was Cardinal Angelo Roncalli on Guido Maria Conforti:

One Fold and One Shepherd

By Cardinal Angelo Roncalli February 17, 1957

A lecture given by Angelo Cardinal Roncalli, Patriarch of Venice (the future Pope John XXIII), at the Royal Theater of Parma (Italy), on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the death of the Servant of God, Guido Maria Conforti, founder of the Xaverian Missionaries.

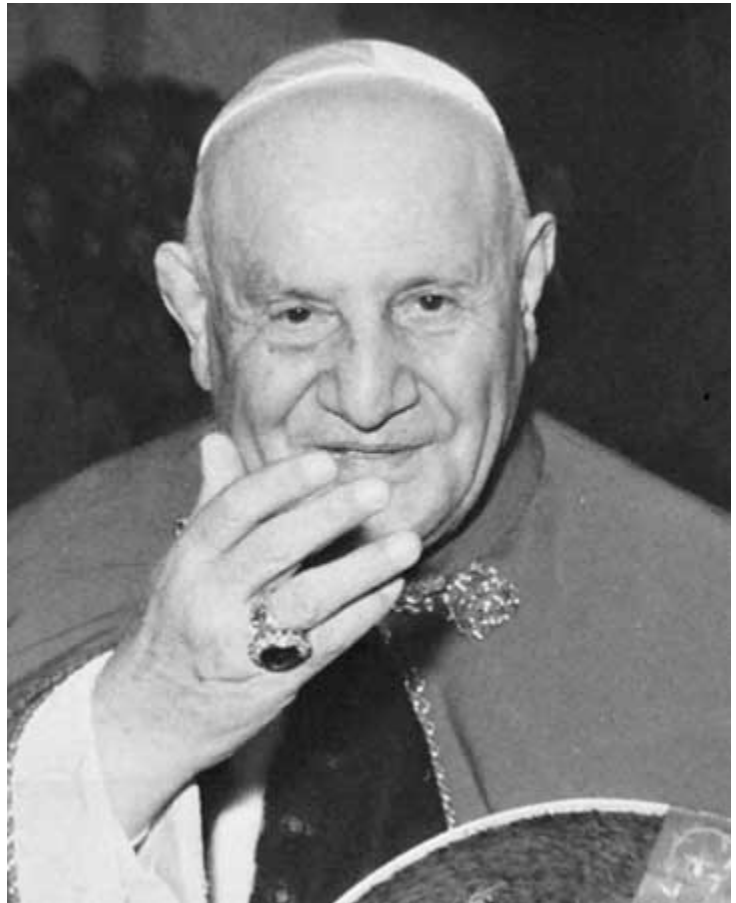
Had I to choose a motto to summarize what I am about to say, I'd like to express it with the words: *"One fold and one Shepherd."*

All the pages of the Gospel are sacred and sparkling: but some concern especially the souls which accept their most intimate significance, and reveal them to the entire world in a more vivid and piercing light.

Take for instance, the following excerpt from the Tenth Chapter of St. John, when Jesus introduces Himself: "I am the door of the sheep... It is through the door that the shepherd enters... As soon as he shows himself, the sheep hear his voice... He calls them one by one, preceding them, and they follow him because they know his voice... I am the door. If anyone enter by me he shall be safe, and shall go in and out and shall find pastures. I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly... I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me... And other sheep I have that are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice, and there shall be one fold and one shepherd."

Such is the rapturous vision of St. John flashed before us: more peaceful and clear than the pictures of the Apocalypse.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, employing these words, and directing His gaze from the pastoral landscape of Palestine to the boundless world, adds: "Even the sheep afar belong to me, because one is the fold and one is the Shepherd."



Cherishing this vision in my eyes and in my heart on the morning of April 26 1922, I climbed the staircase of the Episcopal residence of Parma, to meet the Servant of God, Guido Maria Conforti, Archbishop and Bishop, and Founder of the Saint Francis Xavier Foreign Mission Society.

The First Visit

In an old diary of mine, I read on this day only these words: “A cherished visit with Bishop Conforti.”

My first meeting with him had taken place twelve years earlier in Milan at a Catholic youth rally, on the occasion of the celebration of the Third Centenary of the canonization of St. Charles Borromeo.

At that time, even at a distance, he impressed me as a man of dignity and meekness. Now, I was to meet him as a vital force in that providential missionary movement effected by the Encyclical “Maximum Illud,” of Pope Benedict XV, of blessed memory.

I recognized him, vested in the fullness of the sacred ministry of souls, combining the episcopacy with the missionary life: *Bishop of Parma, but missionary to the whole world.*

A short time before, I was engaged in an unexpected service to which I was called by the Holy Father. With the command to leave everything which had absorbed my activity for seventeen years in the priesthood, I was to dedicate myself, out of Rome, to re-organize the various activities of missionary cooperation in Italy, starting with the Propagation of the Faith.

It was obviously natural for me to get into respectful contact with a prelate admired by all Italy for his personal qualities of wisdom, meekness and pastoral zeal, and around whom, as Founder of a Missionary Society which in that very year received the Decree of definitive approbation from the Holy See (Jan. 5, 1921), notable attention was centered.

Such was Bishop Conforti when I first met him in April of 1922; such was Bishop Conforti as later I met him in Parma, in Rome, and elsewhere.

A perfect prelate, an efficient pastor in the fullness of the sacred service which is proper to every bishop of God’s Church, he was dedicated to the office entrusted to him by the Divine call and by holy obedience. He was endowed with a generous spirit and a great heart, committed to the great concept of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ.

The tribute of my unpretentious words to Bishop Conforti’s memory can but briefly visualize a life which was an altar of sacrifice, erected in the midst of the faithful to edify and to teach them. May God grant, even with the official blessing of the Church, that he may intercede for them to win earthly and heavenly graces.

Let us consider the Servant of God, Guido Maria Conforti, noting his youth, his maturity, and the years following his demise.

Youth

Bishop Conforti's youth was enlightened by a flaming glance. St. Mark, in his Gospel, tells of that rich and good young man who, craving for greater perfection, asked Jesus about the most conducive means to attain eternal life.

Jesus, Mark relates, looked at the young man and loved him. He suggested that he sell his possessions, and distribute his money to the poor, turning it into a heavenly treasure which would follow him.

As a youth, Guido Maria Conforti, on his way to the school of the Christian Brothers, used to stop daily before the huge Crucifix in the Church of Peace in Borgo delle Colonne. He was more courageous than the rich young man. *"I was looking at Him,"* he would say, *"and He was looking at me. It seemed that He was whispering many things to me."*

Among these many things, there was his vocation to the priestly life, and to the missionary apostolate. At first, this was not vividly outlined, but later on, while reading a small biography of St. Francis Xavier, as the mustard seed sown in his heart, it grew in a constant crescendo in the intimacy of his spirit. Ever since these days, the Saint's picture was to be clearly impressed in his mind.

As a matter of fact, since third year Latin, the mustard seed in Guido Maria Conforti was mysteriously working toward a complete transformation of his pure, innocent soul. The young student felt an irresistible attraction toward two ways of spending his priestly life. The ordinary pastoral ministry in his native diocese and the particular apostolate in the foreign missions were both callings of some uncertainty, and of mild conflict.

The "Our Father," which as a youth he knew so well, points out the most radiant facets of his spiritual growth: the Name, the Kingdom, and the Will of the Heavenly Father. Yet they are so interlocked that the pursuit of either the first or the second cannot stand without the third, namely the Divine Will.

His submission to the Divine Will was always an unaltered sentiment which never faded throughout his entire life.

Moreover, he held for certain that he ought to become a priest, and his angelic preparation was positive evidence of this fact.

long his way, the horizon might have been better defined. Guido Maria Conforti's love for the missions was an interior flame always kept burning with the greatest concern.

A Perfect Seminarian

Guido Maria Conforti excelled as a perfect seminarian. Faithful to the rules, devoted to study, he was always the first in his class throughout his courses of Latin, philosophy and theology. However, he was far from advertising his successes, though he well deserved them on account of the penetration of his intellect and the constant, strong application of his energies. For twelve consecutive years he was rated as "excellent" or "eminent," and was awarded the highest honor. Later on, Guido Maria Conforti was to

go to Rome to take the Degree of Doctor of Sacred Theology as a deserved honor bestowed on him by Providence.

More than his lively intelligence and learning, Guido Maria Conforti's distinct personality radiated meekness and discretion. Without imposing on anyone, yet obviously superior to all, he was universally esteemed and cherished.

Along the way disappointment because of ill health put a cross on his shoulders. However, the painful procrastination of his priestly ordination did not upset his spiritual serenity.

When Guido Maria Conforti's classmates joyfully left the seminary to exercise their priesthood, he remained on the seminary premises, entrusted with the delicate tasks of prefect, vice-rector, and professor.

It was a great privilege in those years of formation, like a stem growing close to a sturdy tree whose vital sap and beneficial shadow contribute, providentially, for better maturation, to be guided in his early priestly years. I allude to Canon Andrea Ferrari who, through ways both mysterious and simple, was developing natural and spiritual energies to be utilized later as the saintly Cardinal Archbishop of Milan. This remembrance affects my heart, as it fills with joyful pride the heart of every good Parma resident. [...]

In Parma, let us put together the figures of these two great churchmen, Andrea Ferrari and Guido Conforti: both inflamed with the same spirit, imbued with the same zeal for Christ's cause, for the salvation of souls, and for the universal Church.

If we follow them during the years they lived at the seminary, the first as rector, and the latter as vice-rector, it is easy to understand the workings of grace and sanctification, of which both were later to be extraordinary messengers and ministers.

The Foreign Missions

The strong interest of Father Guido Maria Conforti in the foreign missions was controlled by discipline.

The acceptance of the third petition of the "Our Father" was confirmed by the young priest's attitude. He felt for certain that his time had not yet come. Years later, Bishop Conforti presaged that the route of the seas did not refer to him. However, Divine Grace would grant assistance that he might point out the overseas lands to others.

In the exercise of his ministry, Bishop Conforti was always a source of edification, both to the clergy and the laity. The extraordinary intuition of the austere Bishop Magani, Bishop of Parma, elevated Bishop Conforti to the highest positions in the ecclesiastical government of the diocese.

Bishop Magani, so different in temperament, used to call Father Conforti his David, or the Vicar of graces. He appreciated his fidelity, wisdom, and cooperation which redounded to the consistency of an organization implying serious responsibilities so as to protect it and sponsor it in conformity to the exigencies of times, places, and circumstances.

Truly, the early years of Bishop Conforti were blessed by God and by human beings.

Furthermore, what seems astonishing in retrospect, and is recognized today as a happy event, is the fact that the young priest Conforti was able to concretize his hopes and ambitions with the establishment of a missionary society. His dreams were as seeds in a state of fecundation by constant prayers and sacrifices, but eventually germinated in the sun of an exulting spring.

Bishop Conforti had learned how to wait, and during the years of hope and expectation, he worked. Since his ordination in 1888, and since he received no answer when he knocked at the door of the Jesuits and Salesians, he worked along. Bishop Magani understood the situation and let him proceed, on the condition he would remain as cooperator in the diocesan government.

In 1894 and 1895, as Cardinal Ferrari assumed the responsibility of the Milanese Archdiocese, the young vice-rector of previous years, sharing the same spirit and forged in the same fire, opened his Institute. He dedicated it on Dec. 3 1895, so as to draw its name and inspiration from St. Francis Xavier.

Therefore, far more courageous than the rich young man of the Gospel, Guido Maria Conforti, in Jesus' imitation, made a perfect response, indeed.

Using his family inheritance, along with his own meager savings and the help of a benefactress, the Founder opened a comfortable house as a haven ready to shelter his first pupils. The house was located at Borgo del Leon d'oro, not too far from the Cathedral and the diocesan Major Seminary. It was in the very heart of the city and the diocese of Parma. Inside its modest rooms serious work was carried on: study, prayer, and the proper training necessary for helping the sheep which belong to Christ, but are afar off. Though afar, they too must hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, to make with him "One fold and one Shepherd."

Archbishop of Ravenna

This was the spiritual apostolic early life of the Servant of God, Guido Maria Conforti. What about his maturity? It may be measured from May 1902 to November 1931 – thirty years. Then followed his passing away, to the heavenly life.

Bishop Conforti's mature years began with a great sacrifice, similar to that of Abraham, - namely, a generous act of obedience to the will of the elderly Pope Leo XIII. Unmoved by Bishop Conforti's prayers and tears, the Holy Father designated him Archbishop of Ravenna.

Bishop Conforti to the amazement of many, was then only thirty-seven years old.

Card. Parrocchi, after Bishop Conforti's consecration at the Basilica of St. Paul in Rome, was enraptured, and gazing at the imposing majesty of the new Archbishop's pontifical appearance, exclaimed, "What a vision!"

Bishop Maffi, later famous as the Cardinal of Pisa, and appointed at this same time Bishop Conforti's Auxiliary in Ravenna, honored Bishop Conforti with these words: "The Lord has visited His people, and has sent a great prophet to them."

As a true prophet, Archbishop Conforti dedicated himself to his Archdiocese. While discharging his duties, he underwent protracted sufferings for twenty-two months. When the new Pope, St. Pius X, lightened his burdens, fearful that he would lose his life, Archbishop Conforti had already secured the gratitude of the clergy and of the people who were witnesses to his inexhaustible patience and endless charity.

Shepherd of Souls

The remarkable pastoral activity of Archbishop Conforti in the diocese of Parma prompts us to be edified, and must be compared to the stupendous undertakings of those illustrious prelates who, in modern times and even in our century, honored the most famous Episcopal sees of Italy.

Concerned, as Archbishop Conforti was, about his Missionary Society, he might have run the risk of neglecting the formation of the diocesan clergy for lack of personal vigilance concerning discipline, piety, study and care of material things. This is not so.

It is evident then, that Archbishop Conforti took to heart the material and spiritual welfare of two sons, both dearly beloved and fraternally united in spirit and understanding. All things worked well toward the realization of the one fold, and Parma came to symbolize the maternal anxieties of the Universal Church.

The mustard seed, sown in the young heart of Guido Maria Conforti during his brief and mysterious colloquies with the Crucifix in the Church of Peace, was fostered by him as a seminarian, priest and bishop, and finally germinated generously.

The smallest of the seeds, vigorously growing, will extend its branches so as to offer shade and shelter to the birds of the air.

The pastoral horizon which reflects the work of Archbishop Conforti in Parma includes a period of thirty years. Here he epitomized the evangelical beauty of the pastoral life. He preferred the country to long office hours. In summer and in winter, under the sun or in the snow, on foot, on horseback, by carriage or by car, he reached all the parishes in his diocese five times. This was his duty, and hence, his joy.

He alleviated the material needs of people by generous donations which almost completely absorbed his revenues. He reduced the standard of his personal life as a bishop to an extreme poverty and to an evangelical simplicity. This was all the more remarkable in a man who, as a youth, was reared in the comforts of his father's house.

As we recall the date of November 5 1931, when Guido Maria Conforti was born to the eternal life, we cannot but think of the words of the Prophet: "O Lord, they shall rejoice before you, as they that rejoice in the harvest." (Is. 9:3)

Certainly this was the intense joy of the pious worker when he presented himself and his sons to the Divine Shepherd! All through his later years Archbishop Guido Maria Conforti had cherished his beloved

sons of Parma, and as his loving and yet veiled eyes gazed at the far-off missions of his Institute, that vision was, for him, a foretaste of heaven.

His Life in God

Without anticipating the judgment of our Holy Mother the Church, we may think of the eternal rest of Archbishop Conforti as the culmination of God's love. It is made evident by his ardent charity, through the desire of the accomplishment of the first three petitions of the "Our Father": the glory and the veneration of the Lord's Name, the Kingdom, and the Will of God.

Moreover, we should not overlook the sufferings of his apostolic life, endured for God's sake, which spiritually united him with Jesus crucified, our glorious Savior.

How fitting are the words of the liturgy, employed in honoring the Saints, particularly the Martyrs and Confessors:

"Thy Saints, o Lord, have followed a wonderful path, keeping Thy Commandments so as to pass unharmed through mighty waters: dry land appeared, and the Red Sea is crossed without hindrance. Because they walked in the footsteps of Christ who clothed them with His bloody garment, they rejoice with Him forever."

Legacy in Us in Imitating his Example

Bishop Conforti's example to the clergy and the faithful are connected with the teaching and the action of his missionary cooperation. The forceful warning of St. John Chrysostom will properly awaken our responsibilities in regard to the missionary apostolate. They sound very appropriate to all of us, be we bishops, priests, or common faithful.

According to St. John Chrysostom, we are not only responsible for our individual salvation, but we must also give an account in regard to the universal world. "I did not send you to two, or ten, or twenty cities, or just to one country, as I sent the Prophets of old, but to all the continents and seas, and to the entire world." And again: "You, says the Lord, shall not be teachers of Palestine, but of all the earth; you shall be not only doctors, but indefatigable doctors."

These impressive and forceful words expound the task of both Catholic bishops and priests, and vibrate as an incitement to every good Christian.

It is again the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, which points out our duty of seeking the far-off and strayed sheep, or the ignorant ones, that they may be united to the one, true fold. This means that the missionary problem is basic for anyone who intends to enact fully his role as a Catholic.

Forty years have elapsed since the end of the First World War. It was Pope Benedict XV first, and then Pius XI who again stressed the need for an active interest in Catholic Missions on the part of the hierarchy, clergy, religious and laity.

Their Encyclicals are beacons which point the way to our people for a better understanding of the mission apostolate. As a consequence, missionaries not only were sought for far-off missions but, in order to provide them with a better preparation and material means, a series of well-coordinated programs were activated. It is with joy that I recall these things, having given my cooperation as a modest laborer in that first hour.

The Missionary Union of the Clergy

The Missionary Union of the Clergy sprang from the heart of an intrepid apostle, Father Paolo Manna of the Pontifical Institute for the Foreign Mission of Milan. Archbishop Conforti was the prelate who gave the final touch to this timely project, and for ten years held the leadership of the Sodality which gained recognition far beyond all expectation.

I heartily wish that the survival of his great spirit might be, from heaven, an efficacious stimulus to exhort every priest and all the faithful to consider the primary questions which belong to history and life in general. These concern Jesus, the Savior of the world, the needs of humanity, and the glory of God's people.

May the heart and the blessings of Archbishop Conforti be always alive as a pledge of endless heavenly graces upon the people of Parma, upon our beloved Italy, and upon the Church of Christ: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.

After twenty-five Years

We are gathered around Archbishop Conforti's tomb, twenty-five years after his death. The Lord, by His merciful Will through Archbishop Conforti's remains, can work miracles for the glory of the elect.

Meanwhile, without anticipating the judgment of the Church, we silently pray and wait.

From pole to pole there echoes the same outstanding motto: "One fold and one Shepherd."

May Archbishop Guido Maria Conforti, Servant of God and of Our Holy Church, grow in honor always.

While imitating his example, may we be the recipients of his blessings, encouraged not to fail in attaining our destiny.

An Ordinary Living image of Christ

*By Fr. Augusto Luca, SX from "Bishop
without Frontiers, Guido Maria Conforti*

***Brief characteristics of Bishop
Conforti's spirituality and
guiding principles of his life as
founder of the Xaverian
missionaries, and bishop of the
diocese of Parma, Italy***

It is extremely difficult to summarize in a few lines the characteristics of Guido Conforti's spirituality, or adequately to express the guiding principles of his life.

He was above all a man of faith. His faith in God was that of an exceedingly active man who saw Providence in every event of life. In the darkest moments, even when faith in himself wavered, he clung to his faith in God, and to the conviction that Divine Providence was without limit.

His spirituality was centered on the person of Christ. Christ was always present in his thoughts and in his heart. Christ was his constant companion in all the actions of his life: in prayer, in his apostolic ministry, in every encounter with every person and in every place, in his moments of sadness, suffering and temptation.

It was from Christ that he drew his inspiration counsel and guidance, and to whom he turned in moments of difficulty and distress. His who being reflected the truth that Christ lived within him.

The motto that he chose as Bishop of Parma, "*In Omnibus Christus,*" was a fitting testimony to all that he practiced and preached. His close union with Christ, above all in the celebration of the Eucharist and in contemplation before the Tabernacle, nourished every fiber of his being and led him to see Christ in all, and especially in the poor, the lowly, the suffering and the sinners.

Conforti's love of God was transformed into an intense, gentle but noble love of human beings to the point of complete self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice. In his commitment to God was generous, his commitment to others was no less, and he gave himself unsparingly to all whom God allowed him to meet.



His friendship knew no barriers. It extended beyond those who were close to him his priests, his students and the people of his diocese, to embrace the whole world.

His constant desire was to give God to all, and especially to those who lived in the remote corners of the earth and for whom also Christ had died and risen. Making Christ known to them was a central and consuming concern. For them he prayed, worked and sacrificed himself.

Among the more striking qualities which people loved were his gentleness, his humility, his honesty, his serenity and his wonderful ability to lay aside all grudges. If he had any differences with anyone, he brought the dissension into the open, fought the battle and then, win or lose, brushed aside all hard feeling.

Such was his charity that even when rebuking someone he could still make them feel completely accepted. In whatever activity, whether it was his daily prayer or daily work or the patient listening to those in need, Guido Conforti displayed remarkable faithfulness in the pursuit of God's will and the good of the people.

His life was not made up of extraordinary things, impressive achievements or spectacularly heroic acts. Those events which might have appeared to many as extraordinary and miraculous were made light of by a humility which turned attention away from himself and sought to give credit only to others.

His heroism consisted simply in doing the will of God with faithfulness and love in whatever way it was made known to him. If a comparison with any of the Saints of the past were appropriate, then it must be that offered by his clergy and the many people who knew him when they claimed that "he is another St. Francis de Sales."

Ordinary people who knew nothing of St. Francis de Sales compared him to the person of Jesus himself. In their simplicity, they expressed the greatest truth that could be said about Guido Maria Conforti: he was a living image of the goodness and love of Our Lord.

Visible Signs of Conforti's Legacy

Excerpts from the 100 year anniversary booklet (1895-1995)

"Since my youth I have always felt the strongest desire to dedicate my life to the foreign Missions" wrote Conforti. Now, the Xaverian Missionaries, the Missionaries of Mary, and people in the Laity all offer their contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel.

On December 3, 1895, Fr. Guido Maria Conforti officially began his "daring undertaking," to found a congregation having as its exclusive purpose "Mission." It was then but a tiny seed planted in the soil of his native land. No one could bet on the harvest outcome.



The Xaverian Missionaries, the Missionaries of Mary, and people in the Laity all offer their contribution to the proclamation

He wrote on March 9, 1894 to Cardinal Ledochowski: *"Since my youth I have always felt the strongest desire to dedicate my life to the foreign Missions and, since I was unable to fulfill this holy disposition at the proper time due to reasons over which I had no control, I decided several years ago to found a seminary for the Emilia region dedicated to this most noble goal. This plan was not weakened in any way by the passing of time or changing circumstances; on the contrary, it became stronger and stronger and, encouraged by the wise counsel of holy persons, I believe it to be inspired by none other than God Himself... I shall offer myself entirely and all I possess in order to fulfill the holy enterprise. I shall thus contribute my own small stone to the great building of which Christ is the cornerstone... Although I am aware of my worthlessness, I shall not be daunted by any contradictions and difficulties; I shall place my trust in the Divine Heart that suffered for all the peoples of the earth and in the protection of the glorious Apostle of the Indies, who shall mercifully protect me from Heaven."*

Over a hundred years have elapsed. Despite its sparse beginnings, that "small stone," that tiny seed can today trace its offshoots to many lands, yet it retained its initial characteristic: to remain a "unpretentious family." Xaverian

missionaries are today present on four continents. From that sole sturdy stalk numerous spirited shoots sprout forth in continuity. These are the youth – of diverse churches, cultures, and nations – who commit themselves to serve within the universal Mission of the Church, to proclaim the "good news" to those who still know it not.



Xaverian Missionaries

The Xaverian missionaries, founded by Guido Conforti, are a visible legacy of their founder. Bishop Conforti preferred to have his missionaries work in China, Asia. His wish, since youth, was to leave for the missions; however, illness raised doubts about the possibility of his priestly ordination. He founded his missionary congregation and was anxious to send his first two missionaries to China, during the Boxer rebellion. Asia represents even today the greatest challenge for the church, where the number of non-Christians is great indeed. The Xaverians went to China, where their Patron, Saint Francis Xavier had hoped to arrive. For fifty years China was the only apostolic field of the Xaverians. During his visit to China, he was heard to exclaim: *"In you, O Lord, I place my trust. I will never be let down."* Could these words not be an overflow of his deep-rooted faith?

In the mysterious ways of Divine Providence, the story of the early Christian communities of the Acts of the Apostles was repeated in the Xaverian family. Persecution caused a scattering and dispersion, this dispersion provided Gospel proclamation to other peoples and lands.

Xaverian Missionaries dispersed as a result of the persecution of Mao now find themselves in Japan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Taiwan, United States, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Sierra Leone, Congo, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad and Mozambique. The Xaverian family history covers over a hundred years. And a group of young Xaverians in Taipei (Taiwan) are preparing to re-travel the route of the first Xaverian missionaries and to renew the dream of Conforti, namely, to announce the Gospel in China.

Missionary Sisters of Mary



The Missionary Sisters of Mary, who were founded in Parma in 1945, are another visible sign of the legacy of Conforti. This is a missionary congregation of women, which have their place within the Xaverian family. The seeds of this foundation can be found in the prophetic and illumined insights of Monsignor Conforti. He had hoped to found a community of missionary women in 1926 and again in 1928. He wrote to Rome about his wish to found a sister branch of his Xaverians. These missionary women were to be “mothers to the world” in a time when a woman’s touch was needed in many areas of the mission world. Bishop Conforti’s untimely death in 1931 placed the dream on the back burner for thirteen years until 1944 when Celestine Bottego was asked to consider an unsolicited and unexpected request. On May 24 1944, in fact, Celestine Bottego expressed her “consent” to

collaborate with Fr. Giacomo Spagnolo in the foundation of the Missionaries of Mary – the Xaverian Sisters. July 19 1945 saw the actual beginning of the community with the arrival of the first sister at Villa Bottego in Parma.

Thus was the unfulfilled desire of Bishop Conforti realized. Faithful to the Xaverian ideals and spirit, Fr. Spagnolo and Mother Bottego wished their community to be missionary, ready to respond to the command of Jesus: “Go forth to the whole world...”

Today the Missionaries of Mary are present in many part of the world: Italy, Southern Brazil, Amazon area, Mexico, United States, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Japan and Thailand. They are engaged in evangelization, catechetical activity, health care, human promotion (especially of women). They draw inspiration from Mary, in the mystery of the Visitation, and hold her to be the model of their interior spirit. Like Mary, they travel the world, hopeful that all people may come to know the love project of the Father and feel to be brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.

Laitry for Mission

Thirdly, the Lay Missionary Movement is certainly an important phenomenon in the missionary life of the Church since Vatican Council II. Lay missionaries leave for mission to make their own contribution there where Churches are being born or where there is a particular need. The Xaverian missionaries, while glancing back over their years of existence, recognize how much they are indebted in their work of evangelization to laity: the parents of Xaverians presently engaged in mission; the friends and benefactors who support our houses for Xaverians in training, and for the vast network of initiatives in mission lands.



Bishop Conforti considered – to be a part of the Xaverian family, and sharers in the merits of his missionaries – such most valued mission cooperators. Speaking of the laity, Bishop Guido wrote:

“My dear brothers and sisters, you too share in the great merit of the works to which the missionaries dedicate themselves, because you have contributed both morally and materially to help them reach their desired goal. You have supported them with your prayers by asking the Lord to

confirm them in their chosen vocation. You have helped them by your generous assistance in support of the Congregation within which they have prepared themselves for the apostolate.”

This family includes many relatives, friends, benefactors, who often in silence, journey alongside missionaries and afford encouragement to nurture this constant miracle of selfless giving by those who offer themselves to Christ for Gospel proclamation

Today it is the wish of the Xaverians that these persons, organized in various groups, who come from every social rank and continent, may become a “third missionary family,” and that inspired by the same Xaverian spirituality, may live and share in a special way in the activities of the entire congregation.

Every family cherishes the giftedness received from previous generations, and the Xaverians are no exception. We treasure the heritage of those who have preceded us, particularly our Founder, Saint Guido Maria Conforti.

We are thankful to our Xaverian predecessors and all members of our extended family, who by their encouragement, generosity, support, make missionary work possible. We share a common dream: *“to make of the world one family.”*

Conforti's Legacy

The Virtues: Why Conforti is a Saint



From the Postulator, Fr. Guglielmo Camera, SX Feb. 21, 2011

Pope Benedict XVI, in a Consistory of Cardinals of Feb. 21st, 2011, recognized the Virtues of Bishop Guido Maria Conforti. What does it mean?

On October 23, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI canonized Guido Maria Conforti, offering him to the universal Church as a gift of the Spirit, as a model to imitate and as a new and living “parable” for our times. Why has the Church decided to propose him as a model to us, to bishops, priests and, indeed, all the faithful?

A Model of Christian life for all the faithful

Bishop Conforti offers us an example of a holiness that does not consist of spectacular works, but in the humble, faithful and constant fulfillment of God’s will at all times. In our own times, when faith is constantly threatened by rationalism, secularism, materialism

and narcissism, bishop Conforti reminds us that faith is our greatest treasure and that it must inspire our thoughts, judgments and action. As a teacher of faith, he proposes a solid path towards holiness to all the faithful, a holiness that he lived and believed possible for all Christians.

In Conforti’s own words: ***“holiness does not consist in extraordinary penances, ecstasy and rapture, in wonderful gifts and great works that attract admiration. It consists in the possession of God’s grace and friendship, in the possession of love, the exercise of virtue, the fulfillment of the duties of one’s own state and in the observance of the divine law. This is the holiness I call ordinary, possible and a duty for all; there is no excuse that can convince us that such a holiness is impossible.”*** (Homily, 1 Nov 1913).

Above all, however, Conforti reminds us of the missionary dimension of the Christian life. All Christians must embrace as their own the plan of Christ to reach the ends of the earth and proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom to all. All Christians, therefore, must be missionaries. By his example, bishop Conforti taught us that it is possible ***“to extend the range of charity to the ends of the earth, and devote***

the same care to those afar off that we do to those who are members of our own community” (Vat. II, Ad Gentes, 37).



A Model for priests

Conforti's life as a priest is well described in the letter he sent to the priests of the Diocese of Parma, on 2 August 1913, to mark the 25th anniversary of his priestly ordination. He encouraged his priests to imitate Jesus the Good Shepherd, the same program he tried to live out each day as a bishop and priest:

“We must love in the same way as Jesus Christ, who gave his entire self for us. Our preference must be for those who are in the greatest need, and who offer us the greatest opportunity to exercise our charity and acquire greater merits in the sight of God. We must prefer the poor, who are the object of Christ's predilection; we must prefer those who are in physical pain, those who bear the burden of sorrow and who need comfort in their state of solitude and abandonment; these people need a friendly word that points them to heaven, which is promised above all to those who weep and bear misfortune with Christian resignation. We must prefer the children; above all, we must show preference to those who have strayed from the Father's house, for those who hate us because they do not know us, those who blaspheme religion because they have never studied it; for these too we must have a profound charity and reach out to them, as far as circumstances allow and, when nothing else if possible, we must at least pray for their conversion.” (Pastoral Letter, 2 August 1913).



A Model for bishops

In addition to his extraordinary zeal for missionary work and his episcopal ministry, Conforti also heroically practiced the Christian, priestly and pastoral virtues, offering a shining example of apostolic, consecrated and contemplative life.

The Second Vatican Council says that the Church is missionary by her very nature (AG 2) and that bishops “are consecrated not just for one diocese, but for the salvation of the entire world” (AG 38). Conforti fully embraced this notion of the Church and the Bishops. He strove to embody this ideal in his life, becoming

a model for his own missionaries, the people of his dioceses and the priests and bishops of the whole Church. While dedicating all his energies to the care of his large and demanding dioceses, he nevertheless keenly felt the *“sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum”* (concern for all the Churches, cfr. 2Cor 11:28). Cardinal Giuseppe Roncalli, the Patriarch of Venice and future Pope John XXIII, aptly described Conforti on the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of his death: *“Bishop of Parma, but Missionary for the whole world.”*



The Virtues

The living faith of the Blessed Conforti shone through his every word and action. His unlimited trust in Divine Providence supported him in all his tribulations, while his inexhaustible love for God and neighbor was visible to all. Faith, hope and love inspired him to found his missionary Institute and sustained him in the countless difficulties that he had to face in the foundation of his Institute and the government of the Diocese.

A central figure in the Italian episcopate in the first thirty years of the 20th century, in the midst of turmoil and important transformations, Conforti always behaved in a virtuous manner, in a continuous crescendo, from his youth

to maturity and until the moment of his death: with the merits he achieved for the Church through his extraordinary zeal for missionary work and his long episcopal government, he offers a shining example of apostolic life combined with the profession of the evangelical counsels and the most intense contemplation.

He also offers an example of a holiness that does not consist of spectacular works, but the humble and constant fulfillment of God’s will in every moment of life. In our own time, in which the faith is constantly threatened by rationalism, secularization, materialism and the pursuit of pleasure in all its forms, Blessed Conforti reminds us that Faith is our greatest treasure and we must allow it to inspire us to think, judge act and behave as Christ, who is the great Model we must imitate and who must be the center of all our thoughts and affection.

Finally, in the missionary re-birth of the Church after the Second Vatican Council, the Blessed Conforti reminds us that every member of the People of God has the fundamental duty to play his/her own part in the missionary effort among the peoples, by collaborating in accordance with their own possibilities, resources, charism and ministry (Cfr. Ad Gentes 35; 28). He taught us through his own life that it is possible ***“to embrace the whole world with love, showing to those who are faraway the same concern we have for the members of our own community.”*** (Ad Gentes, 37)