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**The
Beginnings
of the Salesian
Presence
in East Asia**

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THE BEGINNING OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS IN THAILAND. THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS (1931 - 1952)

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to present the beginning of the work of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Thailand.

The FMA came to Thailand invited by Fr. Gaetano Pasotti, Acting Provincial of the Salesian Congregation and later the first Salesian Bishop in Thailand, to help in the mission field of the Salesian Fathers who arrived in Thailand on October 1927, after they were sent away from China. "I am sure", said the Bishop to the Superiors, "this country is going to be a beautiful field of work and apostolate also for our Sisters". Mother Luisa Vaschetti, the Superior General, accepted the invitation.¹

Some important particulars, the difficulties and the sacrifices the Sisters of the first generation had to undergo in order to give a good start to the works we enjoy nowadays will be briefly recalled in this work.

2. General Background

Thailand is situated in the heart of the Southeast Asian mainland. There are conflicting opinions regarding the origin of the Thais. It could be said with presumed certainty that the Thais originated in Northwestern Szechuan in China about 4,500 years ago and later migrated down to their present homeland. Siam is the name by which the country was known to the world until 1939 and again between 1945 and 1949. On May 1949, an official proclamation changed the name of the country to "Thailand". Thailand is a constitutional monarchy with a democratic form of government. Since 1932, Kings of Thailand have exercised their constitutional legislative powers, their executive powers and their judicial powers through specific government institutions. While not directly involved in

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¹ Cf Province Archive, *Chronicle of the Thai Province* - year 1931.

Thailand's political life, the King exerts a strong moral influence on carefully selected issues.²

The Catholic Church has a long history in Thailand. The first catholic missionaries were Portuguese, they came to Siam in the year 1567. In 1922, the Vicariate of Bangkok had some well established churches, but there were only 30 indigenous priests and 20 missionaries MEP, too few to assist the catholic population of about 25,000. At that time, Msgr. René Perros proposed the division of the Vicariate in three parts and invited some religious orders to come to work in Thailand.³

3. The FMA work in Thailand

Our mission in Thailand began on 14 November 1931, with the arrival of five missionaries from Italy: Sr. Maria Baldo, Sr. Luigina Di Giorgio, Sr. Graziella Amati, Sr. Antonietta Morellato and Sr. Giulia Lauton. The Major Superiors from Turin had appointed Sr. Maria Avio, at that time missionary in Assam, as the leader of the group, so she joined them in Bombay.

The first residence of the Sisters was Bang Nok Kuek village. Provisory, they were lodged in the house where the Sisters of a local Congregation Lovers of the Cross formerly lived who had left the mission before the Fathers of the Missioni Estere di Parigi handed over the mission to the Salesian Fathers.

From their arrival, the Sisters had to share the house with a local community of eight old ladies that had been assistants of the missionary fathers. "The community – said the chronicle – was formed by eight sisters (ladies) who formerly were the right hand of the missionaries in the different residences. All of them were old and they were suffering from many ailments. They had worked very hard and with great zeal for the Church but now their only occupation was the teaching of the catechism".⁴ In the same house, besides these eight ladies, there were some orphans and some other women who acted as housemaids. Annexed to the house, the Salesian Fathers had a small school for girls. They were helped by a

² Cf Acts of the 6th World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Tourism. 2004.

³ Cf Robert COSTET, *Siam et Laos: Histoire de la Mission*.

⁴ Cf Antonio M. ALESSI, *Con Maria nel paese del Buddismo*. Leumann – Torino, Elle Di Ci 1984.

young teacher, Maria Ngieb who later became the first native Daughter of Mary Help of Christians of Thailand.

Our Sisters brought up in much different surroundings and with other mentality had to make great sacrifices to adapt themselves to that situation. Fr. Braga, the Provincial of China, visiting the Sisters said: "...you are the first FMAs who arrived in Thailand so you have a great responsibility in front of the Congregation who sent you and in front of the people who saw you arriving here. We wait for God's miracles but we have to help God to fulfil those miracles".⁵

Besides these inconveniences, they had to face the communication problems because of the difficulty of the new language. The big obstacle the Sisters had to overcome at first was surely the learning of the Thai language. A young Salesian, Giorgio Bainotti, had been assigned by the superiors to teach them Thai half an hour a day.

After six months, the Sisters were able to speak a little bit of Thai, so they could take up the responsibility of the school and the parish activities.

On 2 June 1932, Fr. Gaetano Pasotti, the Provincial, gathered the FMAs, the assistants, the orphans and the workers and officially appointed Sr. Maria Avio as the only superior of the house and responsible for the school and all the activities. This change of course hurt the feelings of the old teachers, but our missionaries tried their very best to make them understand the necessity of this arrangement. The FMA then, could begin to organize their work and the activities of the mission.

Only on 6 January 1934, the two communities, that of the FMA and the assistants were completely separated and their members could live and work independently.

Right from the beginning, our five FMA were under the direct care of the Major Superiors of Turin, but on 18 October 1934, the community was affiliated to St. Thomas Apostle Province with the head office at Madras, like the houses of China and Japan.

On 21 June 1935, Sr. Maria Avio returned to India and Sr. Maria Baldo took her place as Superior. On the same year, the first three aspirants started their postulancy and were sent to India for their further formation.

At the end of the year 1935, other four missionaries arrived in Thailand. The Sisters worked in the school, were responsible for the kitchen

⁵ Cf Province Archive, *Chronicle of Bang Nok Kuek*, November 1931.

and the laundry of the Salesian Fathers and besides that, they started visiting the catholic families in other villages.

4. First exodus

On December 1935, during the provincial visit, Msgr. Pasotti asked the Provincial, Sr. Clotilde Cogliolo, to send two Sisters to the small town of Banpong to take care of the parish school for girls, the kitchen and the laundry of the Salesian Fathers. Sr. Cogliolo accepted the proposal and sent five Sisters there. The Sisters were lodged in a provisory wooden shack. At Banpong, life began in great poverty: lot of work, lot of sacrifices and no comfort at all. On 5 May 1937, the General Council sent the approval for the foundation project of a school.⁶

On 16 February 1938, Msgr. Antonio Drapier, Apostolic Delegate for Thailand and Indochina, blessed the laying of the foundation stone for a new house dedicated to the Sacred Heart. The building constructed by the Congregation, on a piece of land given by Msgr. Pasotti, became the first house of the FMA in Thailand.⁷

In the meantime, Msgr. Pasotti decided to found a new local congregation. He requested the FMA for the religious formation of the new native Sisters.

“I know I am asking you a great sacrifice”, he said to the provincial, “but I think no one better than you can form them giving the principles of the salesian apostolate”.

Mother Provincial immediately understood the importance of having a local congregation for the apostolate in the villages. “Father”, she answered “your trust and confidence is something grand, but I am afraid I don’t have Sisters enough prepared for this important job. Anyway I will try to please you”.⁸

Mother Provincial called back from Banpong: Sr. Luigina Di Giorgio to be the Superior of the new congregation, and Sr. Antonietta Morellato to be the Mother Mistress of the native novices.

⁶ Cf Province Archive, *General Council minutes*, May 1937.

⁷ Cf Province Archive, *Mgr. Pietro Carretto's statement*, 22 July 1956.

⁸ Cf Province Archive, *Chronicle of Bang Nok Kuek*, June 1938.

On 19 March 1939, the Provincial, Sr. Cogliolo talked to Msgr. Pasotti to make clear some points regarding the Sisters and their activities. These were the main points of the agreement:⁹

1. The FMA will definitely leave the house of Bang Nok Kuek to the Sisters of the new native congregation; there they will have their mother house and novitiate.

2. Only four FMA will be left at Bang Nok Kuek: one as Superior, one as Mother Mistress and the other two as responsible for the school, the workroom, the dispensary and the parish activities till the native Sisters would be ready to take the responsibility themselves.

3. All the other FMA, including the aspirants, will live in Banpong.

On 11 April 1939, the FMA went to live in the new house built at their own expense and the school was left under their own responsibility. Finally, seven years after their arrival in Thailand, the FMA could have their own house and their own mission. The school was given the Thai name Narivooth School.

The four Sisters left at Bang Nok Kuek were effective members of Banpong community and they were under the direct responsibility of the superior of Banpong.

During the years 1940 to 1946 the sisters had to undergo many hardships and difficulties. In December 1940 a fierce religious persecution began in the north eastern provinces. All the French priests, brothers and nuns were order to leave the country; some Thai priests and nuns were imprisoned and some were shot dead.

On 13 December 1941, after the Japanese troops broke in Thailand, Sr. Rose Moore, Irish missionary holding British passport, was imprisoned in Banpong and then she was sent to a concentration camp in Bangkok for two months.

In September 1943, when the Italian and the Japanese became enemies, our Italian missionaries were in great danger. Before the Japanese soldiers could do any harm to the Italian missionaries, the Thai authorities quietly arranged their imprisonment in the Capuchin Nuns' Convent ("domicilio coatto"); the Thai cloistered nuns went to Narivooth School and lived with the three Salesian Sisters left there. After two months, our Italian missionaries were free but because of the dangerous situation all

⁹ Cf *Ibid.*, March 1939.

of them went to Bang Nok Kuek and lived there for two full years till the end of the war in August 1945.¹⁰

5. New requests

After the war, in 1947, the Bishop of Bangkok, Msgr. Perros, invited the FMA to take up the direction of the School for the Blind founded in 1939 by an American blind lady Miss Genevieve Caulfield. The superiors studied carefully the situation and at the end accepted the new mission. The Governor of Bangkok handing over the school to the Sisters said: “We entrust these unfortunate children to you and are sure that we put them in good hands. If your religion can make them happy, don’t refuse them this consolation”.¹¹

Haad Yai, was the third house opened in Thailand by the FMA. According to the chronicle of the house: “This foundation was desired and encouraged by Msgr. Pasotti who lent some money, without any interest, to the Sisters, in order to purchase a piece of land and a house. On 28 June 1950, the first 240 girls were welcomed by the Sisters at Thidanukhro School, Haad Yai”.¹²

These first three houses remained under St. Thomas Apostle Province with the head office at Madras until 1952. The Provincials: Sr. Tulia Bernardini, Sr. Clotilde Cogliolo, Sr. Maria Avio and Sr. Teresa Merlo regularly visited the Sisters in Thailand. In 1952, the Major Superiors decided to erect the three houses of Banpong, Bangkok (School for the Blind) and Haad Yai as a Province. This event took place on 24 February 1952. Sr. Antonietta Morellato was the first Provincial. The new province was put under the patronage of St. Mary Mazzarello and the head office was at Banpong.¹³

¹⁰ Cf Province Archive, *Chronicle of Banpong*, December 1940 – August 1945.

¹¹ Salesian Bulletin, January 1947, p. 8.

¹² Cf Province Archive, *Chronicle of Haad Yai*, June 1950.

¹³ Cf Province Archive, *General Council minutes*, M. Clelia Genghini, Turin, 24 February 1952.

6. Conclusion

In these past 75 years, the mission of the FMA in Thailand changed notoriously according to the times. In 1931, when the five pioneers arrived, the mission field was just a small village; now we have 11 houses all over the country.

Today we are 91 FMAs in Thailand, and 74 are native Sisters. All of us, except a few aged Sisters, are involved in the assistance and the formation of children and young people in big schools, vocational centers, hostels and in small poor village centers.

Our first missionaries lived in great poverty and endure with joy and generosity the labour and the privations of the hard beginnings. With their lives, they wrote beautiful pages of courage, sacrifices and authentic heroism. It seems almost unbelievable how our pioneers could give life to such a great enterprise.