

SISTER MARIA TRONCATTI, ARTISAN OF RECONCILIATION AND PEACE

Salesian Thursday, 13th March 2025

In this time of preparation for the celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the First Missionary Expedition of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, I am happy to share with you, in the context of this Salesian Thursday and the Jubilee Year during which we will have the immense joy of experiencing the great event of her canonization, the experience of educational holiness of Sister Maria Troncatti, Daughter of Mary Help of Christians who made communion and peace flourish in the Amazon rainforest of Ecuador. This experience seems to me paradigmatic and strong

Introduction

Blessed Sister Maria Troncatti was a missionary in the equatorial Amazon from 1922 until her death on 25 August 1969. Her great evangelical testimony of communion, lived in with the Sisters and the Salesian brothers of the mission, made her "matrecita buena" (good mother) capable of "doing all to all" according to the expression of St Paul (1 Cor 9,22) and of "mixing" (EG, n. 87) with the shuar and settlers, to make them germinate among themselves and between the two ethnic enemies, through education, and not only, the evangelical culture of encounter (QA. 22), of fraternity, peace and life. I use the term "fraternity" because the two ethnic groups (shuar and colonists) met on August 25, 1969, day of the funeral of Sister Maria, which took place due to an airplane crash, "in a single common pain and in a single expression of regret: "A saint died... Our *mamita*'s gone!». ¹ From her death, offered for peace, a new and lasting force developed that changed the relations between the shuar and the settlers by her mysterious presence operating among the "sons". In fact, the Salesian fathers of the mission, after the birth of Sister Maria in heaven, undertook new works using the collaboration of all, in an atmosphere of brotherhood to be considered incredible. ²

Her figure, set in the experience of communion between the Sisters and the Salesian brothers of the mission in the Amazon, is still alive and eloquent today, capable of giving light and breath to the Church. Pope Francis in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, "*Querida Amazonia*", reports the voice of the Bishops of Ecuador who urge «a new social and cultural system that privileges fraternal relations, in a framework of recognition and esteem for the different cultures and ecosystems, capable of opposing every form of discrimination and domination among human beings» (n. 22). These hopes are in the Blessed Maria Troncatti, with her "evangelical interconnections" of the Salesian mission of the Vicariate of Mendez, a teacher and a model to be inspired and trusted.

1. Origins and missionary vocation

Maria Troncatti was born in Còrteno Golgi (Brescia) on 16 February 1883, she was baptized in the parish church the next day. In her family and in the parish, she distinguished herself by deeply learning the truths of faith and by participating diligently in catechism. She was admitted to First Communion at the age of six. From that day on she was assiduous to the Holy Mass and to communion, according to the frequency permitted by the norms of the time. At the age of majority, she entered

¹ CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM, VIC. APOST. MENDEZEN, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Venerabilis Servae Dei Mariae Troncatti Sororis Professae Instituti Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis (1883-1969). Positio super miro*, Roma 2011, 9.

² Cf CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM, VIC. APOST. MENDEZEN, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Venerabilis Servae Dei Mariae Troncatti Sororis Professae Instituti Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis (1883-1969). Positio super virtutibus*, Roma 1997, 259.

the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and made her religious profession on 17 September 1908. During the First World War she attended preparatory courses for nursing care and performed her work as a nurse at the military hospital of Varazze, in Liguria, trying to relieve with maternal care the physical and moral suffering of young wounded or sick from the front.

2. The start of the mission

In 1922, in response to her generous missionary offer, she was sent to the Amazon rainforest of Ecuador to begin the work of evangelization among the indigenous Shuar. The missionary activity of that group of sisters, conducted in the name of the Virgin Help and Don Bosco spread through the jungle thanks to the constant support of the Salesian Fathers.³

Both in Guayaquil and in Chunchi, Sister Maria exercised her mission as a Salesian educator and trainer among the girls and people of that reality. After a few years she reached Macas, the largest centre of the Vicariate of Mendez, near the imposing Upano river⁴; the Salesian missionary residence was there since 1924, built around the ancient image of the Madonna, la *Purísima*, dating back to at least three centuries before. Around this "center" from then on, the existence of Sister Maria exists.⁵

Sister Troncatti and two young sisters in charge of the school arrived at Macas on 4 December 1925, the feast of Purissima. Before their arrival, Miss Mercedes Navarrete had taken care of the school and supported the faith among the settlers, committing herself to promote education and training for girls with limited economic possibilities. With the arrival of the sisters, she left everything in their hands and made herself available to collaborate as an interpreter for the language shuar, for singing and domestic activities.⁶ In this school «at the beginning of the academic year 1926-1927 two shuar girls entered the class with the daughters of colonists: it may seem an insignificant fact but a wall fell».⁷

3. Artisan of reconciliation and peace starting from the small

In the memoirs of the first mission at Macas (1925-1930), Sister Domenica Barale recounts that the beginnings of the mission were with apathetic girls, without a desire to study or train. Then the girls, the teenagers, the young people happy to learn arrived and this allowed to form a small boarding school.⁸ Sister Barale adds: «From then on, our recipients were the colonist and shuar girls [...]. This allowed us to have a certain relationship also with the parents of the girls of the forest, which we visited every Sunday, together with the priest, for catechesis, and with the help of God many difficulties were overcome».⁹

This is the approach of Sister Maria, the FMA of the community and the Salesian fathers to make fraternity flourish: the charismatic choice of education. Their objective was to educate together the new generations of "opposing ethnic groups", making them live peacefully in school, in the boarding school, in the courtyard, making them protagonists of education paths to the culture of encounter, recognition and appreciation of different cultures.¹⁰ As evangelizers and educators, the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were convinced that the binomial "evangelize by educating" and "educate by evangelizing" would gradually lead them to cultural change based on

³ Cf Dicastero delle Cause dei Santi, *Maria Troncatti*, in Id., *Santi e beati*, cf. <https://www.causesanti.va/it/santi-e-beati/maria-troncatti.html>, visitato il 14/07/2023.

⁴ Cf *Positio super miro*, 6.

⁵ Cf *Ibidem*.

⁶ Cf *Positio super virtutibus*, 100.

⁷ GRASSIANO M. Domenica, *Selva patria del cuore. Suor Maria Troncatti Figlia di Maria Ausiliatrice, missionaria tra i Kivari*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1971, 113.

⁸ Cf *Positio super virtutibus*, 115.

⁹ *Ivi*, 115-116.

¹⁰ Cf FRANCESCO, Esortazione Apostolica Post sinodale, "*Querida Amazonia*" n. 22.

the strength of the Gospel, mediated by their continuous giving for the good of young people and for the promotion of the people.

With their testimony of evangelical life, they had made the school and the boarding school a "free" zone from the law of the jungle and oppression, where to grow in friendship, respect and forgiveness for the Ecuadorians of the future. They were certain, through charismatic experience, that the former students and former pupils, when returning to their respective areas, would bring a new sap based on a mentality inspired by the Gospel and thus gradually limit their revenge and secular oppression. In fact, «in 1930 for the first time in Macas a Christian marriage of two young shuar is celebrated, by their own free choice, no longer predetermined by the contract of the families».¹¹ It was a sign that among the young women educated in the Macas boarding school were forming true women aware of the responsibilities of their baptism and eager to become apostles in their own families¹² and good "women of the house".¹³

The SDB and FMA of the mission, faithful to the Salesian charism, focused on education as a way and door for the evangelization of the jungle. The Salesian confreres in their schools and internships also took children of settlers and *shuar* together. Therefore, if in the provinces and in the houses of the colonists there was hatred, prevarication, revenge, in the works of the Salesian mission animated by Sister Troncatti, by the sisters, by the brothers, the priority was to educate, in the name of the Gospel, to the coexistence of the (*shuar*, settlers, missionaries), to the non-vengeance and forgiveness of offenses. The entire Salesian mission, with all its components, became a true laboratory of communion, a place where one lived and witnessed the Gospel of forgiveness and fraternity; a mission-womb that is fertile and generator of "new creatures" open to peace and life.

4. Reconciliation "in silence".

Sister Maria, from the beginning, through medical care reached the heart of patients and announced them the Gospel. Gradually, with her boundless charity and her willingness to prove herself, she managed to conquer the shuar population. However, the first signs of impatience were soon to be seen by some settlers, who feared that their authority as "masters" over the indigenous peoples would be compromised.¹⁴ They, as they went, «saw the hinges of quiet "possession" and the domination exercised over the *shuar* for generations slip away: as servants in vivendas, or as workers to clear forests for their own profit, in exchange for derisory compensation, negotiated with degrading selfishness»¹⁵, for example: mirrors, combs, necklaces. Some settlers spread false news in the Kivaria, near the Upano river, that missionaries were attracting children and girls to their environment and then selling them "abroad". Sister Maria, who was always ready to justify and forgive, when she learned of this, did not address the families of Machens with strong words, all of them welcomed and benefited in so many ways, but chose silence and tears. She chose the peaceful attitude of those who do not impose themselves, but attract. With meekness she touched the heart and spoke to the heart of those who had spread the slander so much that they repented and became a supporter and promoter of a greater presence of young *shuar* in the Salesian mission.¹⁶ Sister Maria suffered, but she was firmly convinced, and demonstrated it, as Don Bosco said, that in every person there is a point accessible to good and that the colonists had the "memory of the heart" in which they kept all the good received from her. She believed, inspired by the Founder that "education is a matter of heart" and that "who knows to be loved, loves and loves gets everything, especially from young people". So, her crying manifested a greater tolerance towards the *shuar* who felt loved and cared for by her.

¹¹ *Positio super miro*, 7.

¹² Cf *Positio super virtutibus*, 157.

¹³ Cf *Ivi*, 159.

¹⁴ Cf *Positio super miro*, 6.

¹⁵ *Positio super virtutibus*, 121-122

¹⁶ Cf *ivi*, 122.

5. “The dottora and the matrecita” of peace.

Between a dialogue and a fresh drink, or between a medicine to be administered, a tooth to be removed and a bullet to be extracted with a simple knife, an infected wound to be cleaned and bandaged, she always had the prayer of the *Ave Maria* with her and, with maternal questions, she prepared her patients to receive the sacraments administered by the confreres of the mission or gave appropriate advice. «Her *botiquin* became from time to time an outpatient clinic or "*camera caritatis*", a training centre or place for courageous examinations of conscience, an oasis of comfort and hope for souls overwhelmed by spiritual pain or family problems».¹⁷

From the beginning of her apostolate, helping and begging, Sister Maria knew the hard life of the jungle with the categorical imperative of revenge. For the culture of the *shuar* man, the primary aim of living was to succeed in consummating revenge: that is, killing, taking as a consideration the permanent risk of being killed. There was no family that had not done or to do or to fear a revenge. Children were encouraged to the ultimate ideal of developing good warriors and skilled hunters. In the family every morning, the father promoted a real "education to revenge", or "school of hatred". He presented revenge as a sacred duty; the greatest of the duties of the *Shuar* people: personal or family vendettas could be extended for generations and could have secular repercussions even between tribes. For the Kivara, the state of war was a normal situation.¹⁸

From 1922 to 1969, Sister Maria was the "*madrecita*", the "dottora" of all, without distinction; colonists and *shuar* found in her the point of reference. Every day she had to deal with people: "children" marked by wounds of spears, machetes or poisoned due to the bloody internal vendettas, or exploited as slaves by the colonists. The violence shook her strongly. There was a need for a serious change through the education and evangelization of new generations, as well as the accompaniment of adults from both ethnic groups. She succeeded with her words that reached straight to the heart and with her total motherhood, without distinction, not only to make people coexist but also to «support the two races one to another and to make them share in the same justice and common charity» (cf. EG, 87). In fact, not only did they find themselves together waiting at the threshold of her humble *botiquin* (pharmacy-clinic) the colonists, the girls and girls who fled from their *kivarias* because their families were in dispute, orphaned babies for the poisoning of their mother¹⁹, but also maids of farm families and former catechized *shuar* students who went to "take over" the small newborn *shuar* or abandoned white children. In the perspective of "saving life", she realized with naturalness the process of integration of the two peoples.²⁰

To carry out this commitment she asked many Italian women to support these children at a distance, creating awareness of the dignity and responsibility of women both among the "nannies" and among the "godmothers"²¹. They were the same Christian *shuar* or good colonists who took away the babies from maternal infanticide by giving them to Sister Maria "because they are Christian" and therefore aware of the commandment "Do not kill" and of the inviolable dignity of life before God.²²

6. The hospital “Pio XII”, the house of fraternity.

The flourishing missionary centres in Macas, Sucúa, Sevilla Don Bosco witnessed the heroic dedication of Sister Maria, who from 1947 began to think about the realization of a small chapel in Sucúa named after Pius XII. In 1954, she had the joy of seeing it in operation, in masonry, happy to

¹⁷ *Ivi*, 167.

¹⁸ Cf *ivi*, 107-108.

¹⁹ Cf *ivi*, 109.

²⁰ Cf *ivi*, 239.

²¹ Cf *ivi*, 111.

²² Cf *ivi*, 164.

be able to welcome the sick and cure with physical ailments also those of the soul²³. In 1961, she added a maternity pavilion²⁴.

In 1960, together with the Slovak missionary Fr. Juan Shutka, she thought of grouping the *shuar* centres into a federation; for this purpose, they prepared for each village a teacher-catechist and young nurses who would provide first aid²⁵. At the same time (1960-1962) to raise awareness of the dignity and responsibility of women, she also organized «sewing courses, cooking, hygiene, childcare to complete the internships».²⁶

The hospital was everyone's home. The structure was the place of union and coexistence between the two nations, and her person was the centripetal force that attracted solely to direct to God everyone who approached her for every need. Everyone knew that Sister Maria in prayer was the spokesman of all the sick and all people she approached indiscriminately. Few words were needed to grow a deep connection.²⁷ The pavilions to the right and left of the hospital were for everyone, but for a while she had some rooms dedicated to *shuars* who were not used to living in a real room, in a real bed, and also because when they moved from the *kivaria*, they moved with their family.²⁸ Hers was a living testimony of Christian justice. Although everyone found in her support, help and care, her good and motherly heart gave attention and care to the neediest children.

In the many activities of the *botiquin*, and then of the hospital, Sister Maria also took care of the health of the missionaries themselves compromised by the long journeys of evangelization, the daily fatigue of the school and the boarding school, from agricultural work and buildings to be erected by taking away spaces from the forest or the river, from climatic disturbances, diseases and poor and scarce food.

The confreres defined her: "como una madre", "una verdadera madre", "una mamá". It was enough to listen to the problems and joys of evangelization, a fresh drink, a medicine, a remedy for tired and ill feet to create communion and fraternity. Extreme charity towards the missionaries was founded on the spirit of faith which she knew how to see in priests the ministers of God.²⁹

7. Sevilla don Bosco, the citadel of peace.

In 1957 the mission of Sevilla don Bosco, located on the other bank of the Upano river, a parish was created and the following year the government recognized it as a town and as a "civil parish", that is an administrative entity, governed by a "political lieutenant" (with functions analogous to those of a mayor) white, with an "assistant" (or deputy mayor) *shuar*. It was the first case to which such recognition was granted: Sevilla represented for the Salesian mission the realization of a true prodigy, the first country composed by people *shuar*: all baptized and coming from the innateness of the mission. The missionaries themselves prepared a first list of the members of the various *shuar* centres and an important process of aggregation of the centres began with the establishment of the *Association of Chivarius Centres* through the first Convention of Chivarius Leaders validated in Sucúa on 15 September 1961. These passages fed a new sense of dignity among the *shuar* of the place, the consciousness of their rights guaranteed and safeguarded also by the law of God; the opportunity to create stable groupings and stimulate the birth of cooperatives of mutual help. The Association had its own Board, established general meetings with its own Statutes which were adopted, with governmental ratification (Ministry of Labour, Central Bureau of Statistics) also by other centres: Sucúa, Limón, Méndez, Bomboiza, Chiguaza, Sevilla don Bosco, Yaupi. Each centre concluded the agreement which was countersigned by a missionary father "encargado de asuntos jíbaros".

²³ *Positio super miro*, 8.

²⁴ Cf *Positio super virtutibus*, 225.

²⁵ Cf GRASSIANO M. Domenica, *Selva patria del cuore*, 364.

²⁶ *Positio super virtutibus*, 238.

²⁷ Cf *ivi*, 172.

²⁸ Cf GRASSIANO M. Domenica, *Selva patria del cuore*, 318.

²⁹ Cf *Positio super virtutibus*, 184-186.

8. Reconciliation is achieved through human promotion.

On 12 January 1964, at the first provincial Convention of *shuar* Center leaders in *Sucúa*, a plan was drawn up for the *federation of shuar centers*, which was recognized by the ministry and approved as a legal body on 12 October of that year. The federated centres were one hundred and seventy, and over 13,000 members were registered. Salesian Father Juan Shutka was the ecclesiastical assessor because he represented the mission of *Sucúa*.

The aim of the Federation was to encourage economic development through livestock farming, the creation of pastures and the recognition of a legal title to their land and to promote ethnic pride through short daily radio broadcasts in the *Shuar* language from its new headquarters in *Sucúa*. In addition, the provincial registry office of *Sucúa* sent its staff to the designated centres to facilitate the census of the population and the regularization of the civil status of each registered person.

It was known to all that Sister Maria participated with such interest in every situation concerning the life of her "dear shuar"; that she rejoiced in the way of promotion of this people and that she was convinced "defends" their rights, especially those concerning the land, the wages, purchases and sales, and followed every step even though he knew that some settlers were not happy with this progress. In fact, they hardly saw these passages of human and cultural promotion. It was rekindled, therefore, a climate of hostility that had not been found since 1941. The great friction between the two ethnic groups was also based on the different conception of the value of land. The *Shuar*, educated in the "free" land, struggled to get used to the concept of limited property. Moreover, being hunters, they did not base their subsistence on the agriculture and the breeding of the livestock. The settlers, on the other hand, looking mainly at the land of the areas administered by the mission in the valley of *Upano*, considered them little exploited for agriculture while the *shuar* were convinced of the contrary. The opposition generated discontent because the *shuar* suffered from lack of adequate land, while the whites felt that the *kivari* did not use their territory to its full potential.

9. Love "extinguishes the fire" of hatred.

In 1969, because of the Federation, the environment of *Sucúa* became a center of negative reactions, ferments and clashes for different interests of the two ethnic groups. There were also some anti-clerical fringes of the place who wanted the death of priests and nuns; attitudes even of some young people who suffered from the climate of sixty-eight typical of foreign countries.³⁰ They decided to charge the progress of the *shuar* people to their legal representatives: the Salesian fathers. In the Salesian Bulletin, n. 19 of 1969, it is said that: «*Sucúa* is the crucible in which the fusion of two enemy races began: the *Kivarosi*, indigenous people of the region and white settlers from the highlands. Recently (the first months of 1969) new friction was created by the greed of the settlers... The missionaries, of course, sided with the weakest. Hence the anger of some whites».³¹

From the last days of June to July 4th, called by P. Shutka, a "week of agricultural cooperativism" took place, a form of promotion to which all (whites and *shuar*) were invited. Some settlers were furious at the massive number of *shuar* in town during those days. To take revenge, on the evening of July 4th, a great fire was set in the Salesian house and everyone was sure that some settlers had been there. Everything was burned but there were no casualties. Mother Troncatti, after making sure that there were no deaths, retreated to the church to thank the Lord who had allowed no one to be killed and to ask forgiveness for those who had done this action. On the morning of July 5, as every Saturday, she participated in the "rosary of the dawn". All saw Sister Maria crying, while she was unfurling her crown.³²

³⁰ Cf *ivi*, 240-245.

³¹ GRASSIANO M. Domenica, *Selva patria del cuore*, 336.

³² Cf *ivi*, 338-341.

Sister Maria suffered a lot. She loved the others with a motherly heart. While she entrusted to the Madonna her pain, she tried to put a remedy to a situation that could have been a real catastrophe. How to stop this vortex of violence that was ready for revenge?

From the first signs of "warning" she had said that the good of peace and the life of a priest was worth much more than his life. And at other times, after the fire, she had told her sisters that the two races would not be reconciled if there was no victim willing to sacrifice for them.³³ Meanwhile, the *shuar* were ready to counter. They had already gone with the spears from Sister Maria ready to intervene and give space to revenge. Their educators, their trainers, their points of reference had been hit and they needed to be avenged. There were terrible hours among the children of the jungle and the unarmed faith of Sister Maria who managed to convince them: «We have taught you to be charitable and to forgive the offenses. If you truly love me, lay down your weapons at my feet»³⁴ and so they did. «When people came to meet her and expressed concern about the possible revenge of the *shuar*, Sister Maria replied: "I would be very happy to offer my life so that peace may return to this population"»³⁵. Father Juan also spoke of the Gospel and forgiveness of the offense until the *shuar* decided to let go. «There was nothing. And that was the proof that Christianity had taken deep root in the *Shuar* people: it had not taken too many generations»³⁶. It was the proof that they truly loved the missionaries, their formators and educators. The gift of self, love had crumbled thousand-year pillars.

10. Giving one's life for peace among peoples.

On August 5, Sister Maria attended the feast of Purissima in Macas and was also present at two deacon ordinations of young people linked to the mission. She confided to a sister that the Purísima had told her to prepare, because something serious would soon happen to her. On August 25, she prepared to fly to Quito for spiritual exercises. She assured the sisters with conviction that soon, very soon peace and tranquillity would return. After a few seconds of flight, the plane crashed to the ground and Sister Maria died immediately.³⁷

With immense sorrow the news of her death spread in the area. With devotion and sorrow «a family of settlers offered a tomb in their brick tomb»³⁸ for her burial. Nobody wanted the body of Sister Maria to be taken to Quenca in the tomb of the Institute because she had to remain among her "children" as a presence generating peace and fraternity.

A rainbow appeared and lasted until Sister Maria was buried. All made of that sign a biblical reading as confirmation of an accepted covenant of peace.³⁹ Her victimal offering was seen «as the final touch to her countless acts of charity, practiced to help her brothers and sisters, whether they be colonists, *shuar* or confreres and sisters, to bring them all peace and serenity, uniting them once again, as she had always wanted»⁴⁰.

Among her priorities there was always the commitment to the formation and promotion of women. In the *Shuar* culture it was often mortified and penalized because dependent of the husbands-masters and exploited for the most strenuous work activities, without regard to their duties of motherhood and child care.⁴¹

Sister Maria Troncatti, who was an authentic artisan of reconciliation, awareness of the dignity and responsibility of women in every context, today continues to challenge us and encourage us so that we tread boldly paths of communion, of development, of care for life in all its expressions with

³³ Cf *Positio super miro*, 8.

³⁴ *Positio super virtutibus*, 249.

³⁵ *Ivi*, 250.

³⁶ GRASSIANO M. Domenica, *Selva patria del cuore*, 344.

³⁷ Cf *Positio super miro*, 9.

³⁸ GRASSIANO M. Domenica, *Selva patria del cuore*, 367.

³⁹ *Ivi*, 368-369.

⁴⁰ *Positio super virtutibus*, 259.

⁴¹ Cf *Positio super miro*, 8.

a particular look at the promotion of the feminine world with the passion of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

Sister Yvonne Reungoat

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