

# THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE MISSIONARY SISTERS OF THE IMMACULATE

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## INTRODUCTION

As a brief introduction, I would like to start by saying that this text has been written by many hands. I want to mention, first of all the contribution of Sr. Angela Corno, head of the General Archives of the Institute. The list, however, would be much longer if I wanted to remember the names of all those who in the recent years have worked in the research of history and spirituality as well as in the revision of the Constitutions of the MSI. To all, my thanks.

The scope of this presentation is to share about the spirituality of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate and its relation with the spirituality of the PIME. First of all, it must be made clear that when we talk about "spirituality", we mean a certain ordered description of the elements or traits that characterize the life of someone who allows to be guided by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. Any spirituality is born from the experience that a believer has made of God in a certain moment of the history. This experience shapes the life of the person and indicates the path that he/she will follow in his/her itinerary of configuration to Christ.

The Theology and the history of the spirituality show an interesting fact. The spirituality of each person or institution is not born of nothing, but undergoes the influence of the theological understanding of the era, of the ecclesial situation and of the events of the world. Sometimes, receiving a prophetic gift, a spirituality precisely comes to disturb an epoch indicating new paths of following Jesus and ways of conversion for the Church. Another fact is that every spirituality draws from different sources because the believer who lives basic experience founded in God is oriented by someone, reads certain books, lives with other spiritual persons important for him, belongs to an ecclesial movement. All these elements are important in the development of a spirituality. To know the sources from where the person, who is at the origin of a spirituality, has drawn, helps to see better his/her originality, the new interpretation that he/she gives to the collected elements, the unique synthesis that the same spirit realizes in his/her life.

This description can locate our reflection on the relationship between the spirituality of the MSI with respect to that of the PIME. In fact, the experience of the MSI Foundresses - Sr. Giuspeppina Dones and Giuseppina Rodolfi - is crisscrossed with the life of concrete persons belonging to the PIME, in a place - Milan of XIX century - where the PIME embodied universal openness of that Church. We can immediately quote Fr. Paolo Manna, Fr. Giovanni Battista Tragella, Msgr. Lorenzo Maria Balconi. These names represent many other PIME missionaries who have inspired the way in which these two women have thought of their offering to God, their relationship with the world and their concrete choices.

It's impossible to speak of the history, of the charism or of the spirituality of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate without mentioning the PIME. Before going down to the details,

the reading of the first number of the new Constitutions of the MSI can be a clear summary of what we are intending to say:

*A Missionary Congregation in the widest and most sublime sense of the word. (Fr. Manna)*

Jesus the Apostle of the Father, sent into the world to proclaim to all the Good News of the Kingdom and make of humanity one family in love.

Contemplating Him, through different spiritual experiences, as a sower who sows the seed far, beyond the horizon, and as a seed that dies to give life, Giuseppina Dones and Giuseppina Rodolfi were attracted to follow him to participate in his apostolic effort, in a life totally offered to him.

Moved by the Holy Spirit, who has put in their hearts the unquenchable desire to bring the message of salvation to those who do not know it, after long years of active waiting, Sr. Giuseppina Dones and Giuseppina Rodolfi founded our religious missionary family, to participate in the evangelizing work of the Church with the same missionary spirit of the PIME.

They found in Fr. Paolo Manna a great inspirer of the missionary passion, and in Msgr. Lorenzo Maria Balconi, Co-Founder of the Congregation, a father and a teacher.

Participating in the charismatic experience of Sr. Giuseppina Dones and Giuseppina Rodolfi, we recognise in the face of Jesus, Apostle of the Father, Sower and Seed, the source of our mission and of our spirituality.

## **1. THE PERSONS AND THEIR HISTORY**

We have seen that it is important to know the sources where people have been growing in the development of their own spirituality. Equally important to know the person who lived the founding experience with his/her Lord. We will briefly mention the relevant figures of the PIME, focusing instead on the two founders.

### **1.1. Paolo Manna and Giovanni Battista Tragella**

We go back in time and we stop around 1920. The PIME - or rather the Institute of Foreign Missions - has existed for almost 70 years and has already given martyrs to the Church. The animator and promoter of a great missionary movement is Fr. Paolo Manna, - called soul of fire - assisted particularly by Fr. Giovanni Battista Tragella, great historian of international fame.

Both of them returned for health reasons from their respective missions of Burma and Hong Kong.

Fr. Manna, after his return from Burma, creates an unprecedented missionary animation: he founds magazines, writes books, invents initiatives, such as missionary Congress, the Missionary Union of the Clergy, the activity for the unity of Christians. He wants to involve every baptized person in the missionary commitment of the whole Church.

Sr. Giuseppina Dones and Giuseppina Rodolfi remain fascinated by the missionary spirit they see reflected in the Institute of Foreign Missions of Milan and embodied in a concrete way, especially by the Frs. Manna and Tragella.

## **1.2. Giuseppina Dones**

Giuseppina Dones is a strong willed, concrete, intelligent, extroverted girl, endowed with a strong character, of a tenacious will. Her family lives in the countryside of Milan and her father has a farm where he sells dairy products. Giuseppina helps in the father's business: she receives the goods from the suppliers, delivers the products to the customers, etc.

At the age of 18, during the popular missions held in her parish, she felt the call to be a missionary and thinks of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul.

The family opposed it in a drastic way. Her sister Ida decides to become a religious among the Sisters of the Reparations. Giuseppina accompanies her and, without manifesting anything of her wishes, she is invited to enter too. That was not the Institute she aspired to, but in that decision she saw God's will.

It must be remembered that the Sisters of Reparation - formerly called Pious Ladies of Nazareth, were founded by Fr. Carlo Salerio, one of the first members of the Foreign Missions, returned from Papua New Guinea, after the failure of the mission.

Hence Giuseppina becomes a Pious Ladies of Nazaret. It is on this road that she will meet Fr. Paolo Manna. In fact, towards the end of 1916, the Foreign Missions entrusted to the Pious Ladies of Nazareth the administration and despatch of their missionary magazines. The Institute of Nazareth would not want to accept because that work was not relevant to their charism. They accept it in consideration of their founder. The work is entrusted to sr. Giuseppina Dones who, from the first moment, felt a great attraction towards it.

Within this service, which fascinates her, and which instead her Institute feels like a heavy burden, gradually develops the idea of a missionary Institute for women with the aim of "actively cooperating with the PIME in the conversion of the infidels".

Her main contact person is Fr. Manna. To him she confides her dream for the first time on 15/8/1919. There is agreement on the identity of the new opera, but not on how to implement it: Fr. Manna would like to create a missionary novitiate within the Institute of Nazareth, M. Dones wants a completely separate institution.

At the end of 1926 everything seems ready to start, but the project suffers a setback. Fr. Manna is busy preparing a very long journey to the Institute's missions, which he will carry out from the end of 1927 to the beginning of 1929.

### **1.3. Giuseppina Rodolfi**

Giuseppina Rodolfi is a very timid and reserved young woman; rather introvert, but reflective; perhaps for this reason able to read the movements of her heart, of her spirit. She is a girl who dreams, but not weak. She says of feeling within herself a strong, almost masculine temperament. She belongs to a family of the upper middle class. The father is a manager of the state railways.

Giuseppina Rodolfi also strongly feels the influence of the missionary sensitization exerted by the Institute of Foreign Missions, for the work of Fr. Manna. At the age of 14, only by seeing the title of the first issue of "Missionary Propaganda" she realises what her vocation must be: "I found it - she says - I want to be a missionary". She does not know how to do and where to go. None of the already existing missionary Institutes satisfies her. Her gaze is fixed towards China.

Two years later, exactly on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1916, she has a vision that orients her life and will become the fundamental nucleus of our charism.

She sees a sower in a field without boundaries, who sows the seed with a wide and generous gesture and the seeds fall so far that she cannot see where they fell. He walks alone. He sows alone. There is no one to help him and the field is so vast. Where are the workers? Giuseppina, was deeply drawn to that figure, she feels compassion for the Sower who has no one to help him and compassion for the land that awaits the seed.

The Sower and the Seed repeat themselves, pounding her insistently: "You must be missionary". This certainty will have to travel a very long road before it becomes reality. She fights inwardly with her reserved nature, for which she thinks that a cloistered or eremitical choice would be better. In these moments of crisis, the vision of the Sower is a discriminating fact. Gradually she understands that what she is looking for does not exist yet: she is looking for the *Sisters* of PIME, a feminine face for the Foreign Missions Institute.

Her confidence is Fr. Tragella who helps and encourages her and with whom she collaborates as a zealot missionary. Around Giuseppina forms a group of girls who live the same ideal and wait for the PIME to have its sisters.

### **1.4. Dones, Rodolfi and the PIME**

In the missionary Congress of September 1927 the two *Giuseppine* meet; it is an approach for the initial moment in which Rodolfi opens her heart to Dones and Dones enters fully in the "sanctuary" of this soul. In 1930 the communication of their project of life becomes complete.

The PIME is always a meeting point. Both live the same ideal, the same dream, but neither Giuseppina Dones, nor Giuseppina Rodolfi have the conditions to begin by themselves. They want the PIME to begin.

Because Dones is linked to the other Institute, she does not want to leave on her own initiatives, but at the request of the PIME.

Rodolfi, probably because of her shy and reserved character.

Fr. Manna, from his part, does not take the decision, even when in March of 1930 was strongly stimulated by Fr. Tragella. In that 1930, in an exchange of letter with Fr. Tragella, writes:

*So if you want to do, if you have to do it because God wants it, this Congregation must be a thing much greater than as it is conceived now: it must be a Missionary Congregation in the widest and most sublime sense of the word.*

The decisive turning point will occur only in 1934 during the General Chapter held by the PIME in Hong Kong.

M. Dones, before Fr. Manna, leaves for Hong Kong, joins him with a note asking him to present the project of the new foundation to the Chapter and, she adds, to present it in the form that she has repeatedly expressed to him.

The project is presented to the Chapter Fathers, who vote favorably and entrust its execution to the new direction. At that point, the project passes from the hands of Fr. Manna to those of Msgr. Lorenzo Maria Balconi, the new superior elected in the same chapter, after having lived 33 years in China.

It will be Msgr. Balconi - a man of firm resolutions, according to an expression of Fr. Manna - to do all the steps, official or not, to bring to completion the project.

The new missionary family has its beginning on 8/12/1936 and is placed under the protection of Mary Immaculate.

## **2. THE CHARISM AND THE SPIRITUALITY: FROM THE PIME TO THE MSI**

### **2. 1. A missionary charism**

Fr. Manna thus remains the Inspirer of the new charism: it is he who, radiating so much missionary passion and making it circulate around him, has influenced Sr. Giuseppina Dones and Giuseppina Rodolfi. His expressions found deep echo in their hearts. To use an image, Fr. Manna is like a tap that makes the water to pass to a large tank (the PIME), irrigating new soil and making it sprout.

It is to Fr. Manna that M. Dones asks for a motto for newly born Institute and receives the Gospel phrase: Thy Kingdom Come! - that still distinguishes us.

Giuseppina Rodolfi nourishes her missionary flame by listening to the discourses of Fr. Manna. Here is an example: Fr. Manna's narration of what he has experienced on his missionary journey of two-years:

As a conclusion, Fr. Manna said few words, revealing the ardor and the pain of his missionary soul: and these words remained impressed in our soul; and we felt the duty, the need to shout/cry out to all creatures, that which is the passionate desire of Jesus: "The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the owner of the harvest to send laborers to his harvest! " We need to live in contact with these heroic soldiers of Christ to understand

the missionary problem, to understand its importance, to convince us once more that every sacrifice made for them is nothing before their continued martyrdom.

The two women, who conceived the idea of the new Opera, had suffered, had waited and had worked for its realization are the two founders.

Msgr. Lorenzo Maria Balconi, despite not having had the idea of the Opera - conceived when he was a missionary in China - has contributed to realize it and has never abandoned it, is **co-founder and father** of the new family.

## **2. 2. A missionary spirituality**

### **2.2.1. Before the foundation: Fr. Paolo Manna**

Emphasizing the origin and the charismatic dependence of the PIME, we must also trace it back to spirituality.

Writing to the members of PIME, Fr. Manna thus describes the spirit that must animate the Institute:

What is our tradition of an apostolic spirit? It is that of we being essentially, exclusively missionaries: missionaries in the truest, highest, most sublime sense of the word. One who enters amongst us must know that the Institute has no other goal than the Missions among the non-Christians and that we are all and only missionaries.

Let us confront this page with how much the same Fr. Manna says of the identity of our family, when it was yet to be born. Writing to Fr. Tragella, thus he expresses himself: "It must be a Missionary Congregation in the broadest and highest sense of the word".

It is very evident that the two Institutes correspond, are put on the same level. PIME men and women must correspond to a decisive and absolute missionary exclusivity.

M. Dones and Giuseppina Rodolfi were aware of this and it is therefore not surprising for them, with the fixed mind on the future sisters of PIME, they take every opportunity to listen, to read what Fr. Manna tells to the missionaries and welcome it as if addressed to them. His fiery words take hold of their soul, increasing that *torment*, despite consuming, excites and spurs:

- "The missionary vocation is love for God himself brought to the end of the complete sacrifice of ourselves ... perfection of charity in the perfection of the sacrifice" (Apostolic Virtues, p.358).
- "The spirit of the Institute is the spirit of the Gospel" (Apostolic Virtues, p. 335).
- "The true missionaries represent in their whole life the divine figure of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (Apostolic Virtues, p.91), because "the missionary is the man chosen by God to continue on the earth the life, the work and the passion of Jesus Christ" (Apostolic Virtues, p.403), "to spread the Name and the Kingdom, to save the souls that has cost him all his blood" (Apostolic Virtues, p.339).
- "We work generously, without any self interest, only for souls, only for the Church, only for the Heaven" (Apostolic Virtues, p.196). It is necessary that Christ "reigns over all the peoples of the earth ... To establish the Kingdom of God in the

world, Jesus founded the Church" (Observations on the modern method of evangelization, page 37).

- "Only the missionaries who are holy do great and lasting works and only the missionaries who are holy, filled with God's Spirit, who preach the Crucified Jesus, shall convert the world" (Go from your land, page 76).

M. Dones and Giuseppina Rodolfi keep everything in their heart and, awaiting for the realization of the ardently desired Work, these inspired words are increasingly engraved in them.

In particular, the expressions of Fr. Manna on the need to seek the will of God to adhere to it and to find in the Crucifix and the Tabernacle the indispensable reference points, find in them a special response and deepen their commitment to make God's will their own, convincing them that "he who wants to dedicate himself to the apostolate must have his will as if blended with that of God and he must want only what God wills" (Apostolic Virtues, 115 III Edition).

Above all, when Fr. Manna writes directly to them it becomes the object of reflection, orientation of life and is naturally assimilated according to the gifts of nature and grace appropriate to each one.

In summary, there are two essential aspects:

- the acceptance of the will of God
- the ardour for the missionary apostolate

### **2.2.2. After the foundation: Msgr Balconi**

After the Chapter of Hong Kong of 1934, the genuine spirit of the PIME, which the two foundresses have assimilated from Fr. Manna, sees a natural continuity in the new family, by now came to the light, through the work of Msgr. Balconi.

Through his teachings, echoes those addressed to his missionaries, it is truly the same missionary spirit of the PIME that is transmitted to them, thus fulfilling one of the goals that led to the new foundation, namely: to respond to the need felt by the missionary institutes to have side by side their own religious, trained and prepared according to the exclusively missionary spirit that characterised them. (ref. notes on our Origin p. 61)

Msgr. Balconi was convinced that his first duty, beside that of forming men of sacrifice in the manner of Christ, is also that of making the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate the instruments suitable for the high ideal that must be the life of their life, the soul of their soul, the aspiration of their heart (ref. what I have I give you, p.79). He insists:

- on the spirit of sacrifice and adaptation, indispensable virtues for a missionary (ref. what I have done to you, p.79),
- on the spirit of faith, foundation of obedience, is the pivot around which the life of the community moves (ref. what I have I give you, p.148), the family prepared by the Lord for the fulfillment of the missionary vocation (ref. What I Have I Give You, p.85),
- on the prayer, in its various forms, indicating in the Gospel the principal text to be inspired.

His instructions are substantiated by the stories of his experiences of missionary life and those of the PIME Bishops and Fathers who would visit the young Congregation, exhorting and encouraging the first members to prepare themselves for the missions also "training themselves to submit their own judgment, indispensable condition to do some good" (Chronicle, 1938).

And the young sisters eagerly listen, while it goes increasingly feeding in them the desire for a complete and unconditional donation to the cause of the Kingdom.

### **3. THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE MISSIONARY SISTERS OF THE IMMACULATE**

These are the fundamental lines we have received as an inheritance and which have constituted our spiritual baggage. But, how do we understand our missionary spirituality today?

To answer this question it is necessary to tell again a little bit of history. Our Institute has always had clarity about its charism, but we cannot say the same about the person of the founder and therefore about her spiritual identity.

In the beginning some sisters thought that the founder was Msgr. Balconi, at a certain moment we passed to the affirmation - theologically misinterpreted - that the PIME was the founder, then we realized that the identification of the founders of the Institute was a fundamental task, because the same spiritual identity of the Institute did not depend only on the charism - very clear - but also on the spiritual experience of its founder.

A long journey of research led us to declare in the Chapter of 2006 that the two women - Giuseppina Dones and Giuseppina Rodolfi - were the two foundresses, while Fr. Manna was the inspirer of the charism and Msgr. Balconi, co-founder.

From this moment on, the attentions have turned to the search for the characteristics of the spirituality proper to the MSIs. It certainly had its roots in the charismatic intuition received from the PIME, nevertheless this patrimony had been received, assimilated and transmitted to the MSIs by the foundresses. In this process of assimilation and transmission something new is born.

#### **3.1. Christ, the Apostle of the Father, Sower and seed in the foundresses**

I would like to focus only on one salient aspect, starting from the central element of our spirituality. The image of Christ that the two Institutes contemplate is the Apostle, sent by the Father, who announces his Kingdom and gives his salvation through obedience to the Father's plan.

The peculiarity of the face of Christ the Apostle that colors our spirituality is the face of Jesus the Sower: it is Jesus the itinerant Apostle who scatters with magnanimity and generosity the seed of his word. Not only that, it is the face of Jesus the seed who, in obedience to the Father's plan, accepts to die in the earth to rise again as a ripe ear.

Giuseppina Rodolfi's vision of midnight 1916 underlies this spiritual text:



It is a fact that the missionary torment no longer had any truce: the seed that fell beyond the horizon of a field without a border, that sublime figure repeated to me with an insistent hammering: - You must be a missionary.

The grammatical construction is interesting: there are two subjects - the seed and the sublime figure - with only one verb: *repeated*. Both, the seed and the sublime figure, repeated to Giuseppina that she must be a missionary. The vocation of Giuseppina is to live the mission of Jesus Sower and to welcome the mission of Jesus Seed.

This vision was so important that, twenty years after that night, just at the end of 1936 and at the beginning of 1937, when a small group of girls gathered around Giuseppina and Mother Dones in the first days of life of the Missionaries of the Immaculate, Giuseppina then writes:

I reviewed the magnificent gesture of the sower (Writing B).

She relives it when someone finally catches in the gesture of the good sower the appeal to follow him and joins her and M. Dones. The vision is accomplished with the new foundation. In the XV year of foundation of the Institute, this understanding returns in the words of Mother Giuseppina Dones:

Fifteen years ago, on the afternoon of 8 December (1936), the first two sisters knelt before the image of Mary Most Holy. Our little religious family began by placing under the mantle of the Immaculate Virgin themselves and all the souls who, responding to the Divine call, would come to swell their ranks. From that day the protection of Our Lady never failed and the small seed, grew, was also transplanted on distant lands that in three years has already given good fruits and hopes of greater good for the future, if you have a greater number of holy Missionaries and formed for the sacrifice.

Jesus Sower and Seed tells us which must be our style, our way of doing mission.

### **3.2. Christ Apostle of the Father, Sower and Seed from the PIME to the foundresses**

At the beginning of our history we notice that the gaze of our Foundresses was fixed on Jesus, the Apostle of the Father, who becomes an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

It is Jesus, sent by the Father, who shows himself to Giuseppina Rodolfi as a Sower in a field without boundaries, waiting for labourers for an endless sowing.

It is Jesus, sent by the Father, who sends the PIME missionaries, always few in relation to the harvest, whom Giuseppina Dones meets in her work at the service of the missionary press and with whom she wishes to collaborate fully.

In the spirituality that permeates all the PIME initiatives of missionary animation, to sow is not enough if one is not also the seed that dies. The prayer of Mazzucconi which every missionary leaving for the missions recites springs from this logic: "Blessed will be the day when I have to suffer much ... more blessed would it be if I could be found worthy to shed my blood".

Also Fr. Manna repeats: “By dying on the cross Jesus has brought us forth to new life” and consequently the missionaries must be “generous in sacrifice because they are intimate friends of Jesus Christ crucified”. The witnesses of life of the PIME Missionaries are eloquent.

Later Giuseppina Dones will entrust to her missionaries the essence of her thought: “You sow with sacrifices and in due time the seed will grow and others will gather the harvest rejoicing”.

The words that Giuseppina Rodolfi hears from Fr. Manna and makes her own, also is an efficacious synthesis: “Have we not come to save souls? To them then, all our activity and if God wants, our life too”. It is the activity of the sowing and the life of the seed.

## **CONCLUSION**

The same work that was presented about the core of the spirituality of the MSIs, borrowed from the PIME, assimilated and transmitted by the foundresses to the MSIs, was made for every aspect of spirituality as cited above. The text was published as a study of the spirituality of the MSIs in the text: To the roots of our spirituality: Jesus, the apostle of the father, the sower and the seed.

The path travelled together until now has enriched us reciprocally. The realization of this meeting is a testimony of this reality and perhaps it will also become a new starting point.

I conclude with another quotation from our Constitutions from number 31 with the hope that this will always be implemented more effectively:

A special bond links us to the PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN MISSIONS (PIME) for its role in the foundation of our Institute and for its participation in various moments of our history.

We work in the Church with the same missionary ideal and, by respecting the autonomy of each one, we collaborate in the field of evangelization and missionary and vocational animation.