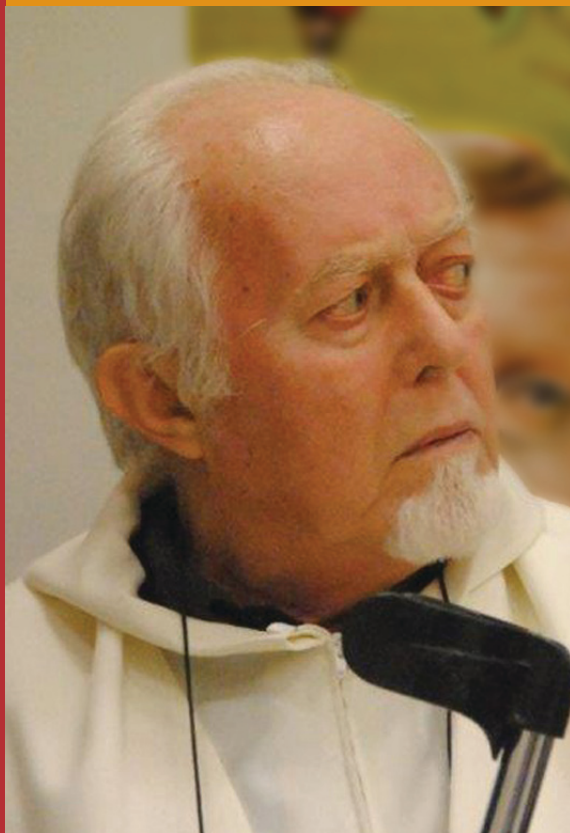


11/2016

# In memoriam

Xaverian biographical profiles



## Fr. Franco Fiori

8 October 1935 ~ 24 October 2016



# In memoriam

## Fr. Franco Fiori

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*Castelleone (CR – Italy)*  
8 October 1935

*Parma (Italy)*  
24 October 2016

On 7 June 1984, Fr. Franco Fiori wrote to the Vicar General, Fr. Francesco Signorelli, in reply to the notification of his transfer from the Region of Sierra Leone to the Region of Great Britain: «I won't pretend that it is easy for me to leave behind "even for just a few years" the place to which I believe I have given the best years of my life. Confreres, teachers and students, lepers and local and foreign directors were never just a point of reference for me, but people who became a part of me. No human consideration can explain even just a temporary detachment from them. Only FAITH helps me to see and accept God's will in this new assignment [...]. I hope I will be assigned to pastoral work with people, where I can put my Sierra Leonean experience to good use».

"Without faith it is impossible to please God" (*Heb 11:6*): this was the *guiding principle* of Fr. Fiori's long existential journey. Unless we keep in mind the faith that sustained him in his response to God's will, it would be impossible to understand his positive existential and spiritual experience. Fr. Fiori's life was a long and concrete journey of faith that knew both joy and suffering, a faith that gave him the certainty that God governs the world with holiness and justice. On the basis of this faith, he placed his life entirely in God's hands.

Franco Fiori was born in Castelleone, a village in the province of Cremona, on 8 October 1935. After elementary school in Castelleone, on 1 October 1946 he joined the Seminary of Cremona, which was “a diocesan community open to the Church’s universal mission”, where he studied from the first year of high school until the first year of Theology.

More than a few seminarians joined the missionary Institutes. In Franco Fiori’s case, «during the third year of high school he read about Fr. Damian de Veuster and his heroic dedication to the lepers on the island of Molokai. This was the first sign of things to come and he began to waver in his intention to become a priest in the diocese of Cremona. During the first year of Theology he asked to be allowed to train to become a missionary. Bishop Bolognini was reluctant to lose a future parish priest and told him that a parish could also be his mission. God arranged things such a way that he would eventually leave the seminary and begin the journey that would eventually take him to Africa».<sup>1</sup>

Regarding his decision to join the Xaverian Institute, on 12 November 1957 he wrote to the Superior General Fr. Giovanni Castelli:

I have been thinking about the missions for some time now. I began to pester my parents and spiritual director in the fourth year of high school. They all said no: my parents because I was too young and my spiritual director because he did not believe the decision was mature.

As I progressed in my studies, the thought became more and more persistent. The decisive moment came during an excursion in the mountains, when I read the Encyclical Letter *Fidei Donum* containing the heartfelt and urgent appeal of Pope Pius XII for missionaries to go to the countries that did not know Christ. I could not resist the Pope’s anguished appeal and I discussed it a few days later with my spiritual director. He told me to pray a lot about it and that we would speak about it on my return to Cremona, when he said he had no objection to my becoming a missionary. I never had any conflict with my rector, Fr. Grazioli, despite the fact that I never excelled in discipline. When I told him that I had decided to become a missionary, with the consent of my spiritual director, he said to me: “I am not in favor of your decision. How will you be able to endure a harsher discipline, you who are so impatient and rebellious at times? Remain here one more year and show me that you are capable, then, if you still have this desire, I will not give you my consent, but I will give you my advice”.

I said nothing; he seemed to be very convinced that I will return to the Seminary. During my time there I was always supported and encouraged by the vice-rector, Fr. Ettore Macchi, and you can ask him anything about me. It is with his consent that I now ask you to admit me to the Institute.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Missionari Saveriani*, July-August 1984, p. 6.

He joined the Institute on 14 November 1957 in the Novitiate at San Pietro in Vincoli (RA). He made his First Profession on 16 November 1958 and continued with his Theology studies in Parma, where he was ordained priest on 13 November 1960.



In August 1961, Fr. Fiori was assigned to the Xaverian Region of Great Britain. He studied English, which was essential for working in the mission lands that were former British colonies; in the meantime he taught geography and art to the young students of the St. Francis Xavier College in Coatbridge (1961–62). He later attended a course in Mass Media and Communication at Boston University, where the formation and diploma he received were very useful when he organized the National Campaign against leprosy in Sierra Leone, West Africa.

In connection with his work as an art teacher, Fr. Fiori was a “summer” student of the painter, Francesco Filippo Arata (1890–1956), like him a native of Castelleone, who strengthened his innate passion for drawing and painting. In connection with this, Giorgio Bonali, a journalist and collaborator of the newspaper *La Vita Cattolica* of Cremona, wrote on 16 March 2008:

Fr. Franco Fiori, the Xaverian Missionary who is already known to the readers of our newspaper, invited me to the Xaverian junior seminary in Via Bonomelli, to show me his most recent painting dedicated to Christ’s passion and death [...].

Last year, “his old friends in Glasgow”, the enclosed Carmelite nuns he met when he was studying English in the city, asked him to paint the 14 stations of the Cross depicting just the face of the suffering Christ in different expressions and positions. He looked for some models of inspiration for his work and he found it on a card that had been sent to him some years ago by Pope John Paul II, bearing the consoling words “In Christo est salus et resurrectio nostra”. He then had to deal with the difficult task of repeating the same face in 14 different scenes.

The result, which he proudly showed me, was put on exhibition in Glasgow and the substantial proceeds were immediately sent to Africa to help his children “who are dying like flies”.

Fr. Franco made his Final Profession on 3 December 1961. He wrote to the Superior General, Fr. Giovanni Castelli, on 24 October 1961:

I have completed the three years of temporary profession and, without any hesitation or concern, I ask to be admitted to the Final Profession on 3 December.

I have no hesitation because I have been greatly edified by the confreres over the past four years. The example of Brs. Frolla and Andreazza shows me that it is possible to become holy in the Xaverian Congregation... even if by doing only the most humble things that the Congregation may ask of us.

If I am not a "saint", the fault is mine, not the Congregation's. I therefore ask forgiveness for any distress I may have caused to the Congregation and to you. I promise to do my best to fulfill the lifelong commitments I am about to take on.

Please pray for me at the tomb of our venerable Founder.



On 25 August 1962, after two years in Great Britain, Fr. Franco wrote to the Superior General:

This is the last day of my annual retreat at the Redemptorist Fathers in Perth [...]. From the spiritual point of view, thanks be to God, things are going quite well. I have tried to be faithful to those few points (five in all) that Fr. [Amato] Dagnino gave us before we... dispersed.

I have done my best in my relationship with the confreres and I did what I could with the students. I may have made some pedagogical errors, but I console myself with the thought that it is all part of experience.

I have learned enough English to give short sermons on Sundays. In brief, I am doing some ministry and, at last, I feel that I am a priest!

What awaits me now? Africa or Coatbridge? You told me to stay here until Christmas. In the meantime, Bishop Azzolini has written to tell me that he wants me in Sierra Leone soon because he needs a Father for the parish and the school of Kabala. Here they are asking me to teach some subjects this year.

My main desire is not to miss out on... the Missions. Otherwise I would end up believing that Bishop Grazioli was right when he said to me: "You are not suitable for being a missionary. They wouldn't know what to do with someone like you".

At the beginning of October 1963, Fr. Franco was already at work in Sierra Leone. He wrote to the Superior General:

As you know, I am in Kabala with Fr. Bramati. I am happy with this assignment because, with his patient help, I can prepare for missionary life.

Now I must replace Fr. Bramati in the secondary school: I never imagined that I would come to Africa to teach... Latin. I will do my very best, though in this climate, school is a very demanding task.

I will teach for twenty hours each week, including the Catechism in some classes. I was apprehensive on my first day when I entered the classroom: I thought I would be dealing with students of the same age as those in Scotland, instead they were all older.

This is my daily routine for now: school from 8.30 until 14.30, with the exception of some free periods. In the afternoon I correct homework. At first sight, it might seem a disappointing job for a newly arrived missionary but, since I did not seek this task, it comes from Divine Providence. I can see that everything has a purpose. In fact, my time at Coatbridge with the young students has helped me to adjust to working exclusively in the school.

I thank you for everything you have done for me [...].

The Sierra Leonean adventure, unfortunately, lasted just two years. In September 1965, Fr. Franco was reassigned to Great Britain as treasurer in Coatbridge (1965–67), where the financial situation was desperate. In one year of work, with the help of Divine Providence, he settled the debt.

On 16 November 1966, he wrote to the General Councilor, Fr. Augusto Luca:

I am asking to be sent to the Missions again for the following reasons:

1. The fulfillment of my ideal lies in direct missionary life, or at least in a good experience lasting some years in the missions. Perhaps these ideas sound crazy. However if I knew things would end up like this, when I left the Seminary (after being *EXPELLED* for wanting to be a missionary) I would not have hesitated to look for a missionary bishop and make myself available to him. My missionary vocation was inspired by the appeal of Pope Pius XII in *Fidei donum*. Everything else for me was, and remains, a means to an end.

2. Financial work, in the way it is organized here, causes me a very intense spiritual imbalance and it is a task that one can do for a year. Since there are great dangers involved, I appeal to article 70 of the Constitutions. If you need any more information on the work that is being done here, you can ask Fr. Cisco who was here with me.

I am not rebelling against the Superiors. I am only expressing my desires and thoughts clearly. I have done my duty, and I have worked very hard, for one year and now I beg you to help me [...]. They tell me that everything is in the hands of Fr. Castelli, who has already said that no one will be moving from Scotland.

Father, please help me. I am not asking for a comfortable life, but to go to the missions [...]. Someone may tell you that I have been seriously

ill and this is true: on my return from Africa I underwent surgery for an abdominal abscess, which was followed by other complications. Now the doctors here are ready to authorize my departure.

I will be very grateful if you can help me in any way.



In July 1967, Fr. Fiori was back in Sierra Leone and he remained there until 1997 with an organizational role in the activities of the mission: Inspector of the 120 schools of the Makeni diocese (1967–77); Rector of the Domus in Freetown-Kissy and in charge of hospitality (1975–78; 1980–82); Chaplain to the prisons of Pademba (1975–80) and Chaplain to the Sierra Leonean and Nigerian soldiers in the community of St. Luke in Freetown (1989–97) and, above all, Director of the *West Africa Leprosy Secretariat*. This long period of activity was interrupted by brief periods of rotation in the United States of America (1973–74) and Great Britain (1984–86).

Fr. Fiori dedicated ten years of his missionary life to working in education. As a school inspector of the mission schools in the northern province, it was his task to guarantee the smooth running of existing schools, to open new ones in areas where there were no schools, to select the teachers and ensure that salaries were paid. He was responsible for 35,000 students, 900 teachers and 120 schools during those ten years: a sufficient period of time to earn a gold star in good conduct!

On Saturdays and Sundays, Fr. Fiori visited the prisons, which had been built to accommodate 300 prisoners, but which actually held more than one thousand. The guards and prisoners were all his friends. Fr. Fiori took to heart the prisoners' suffering; he spoke with them and kept in contact as much as possible with their families. Since capital punishment was in force, he also had to accompany several prisoners to their execution.

Fr. Luigi Brioni writes: "He told me often about his meetings with prisoners and the spiritual and material assistance he gave to them; above all, he told me about the prisoners he had accompanied to their execution. He spoke of one young man who, although he was innocent, had accepted the death sentence in order to go to heaven! Fr. Franco visited President Siaka Stevens to tell him of the sad story and he promised that no one else would be executed, a promise that he kept".

At Castelleone, two small pictures on the wall of the house remember the prisoners of Freetown. One bears the phrase: "One who has loved knows the pain of departure", and the other: "No storm shall ever wipe out your memory".



The already quoted journalist, Giorgio Bonali, writes about the 16 years Fr. Fiori spent on the first line against leprosy in Sierra Leone:

From the headquarters of the operation in the capital Freetown, the range of action extended to the north for 200 kilometers and to the south for another 200 or 250 kilometers, between swamps and islands, savannahs and forests, mountains and plains [...].

As he dealt with this huge problem, which brought him into contact with more than 12.000 lepers, a number that was reduced to just 800 when the program was handed over to the local authorities after 16 years of hard work, Fr. Fiori realized that the first necessity was to convince the lepers that their illness was not God's curse upon them and that they could be easily cured; it was also necessary to convince the families and village chiefs to look after their sick people at home and thus close all the leper colonies. The assistance provided by Germany, under the auspices of the World Health Organization, was given by two hospitals, an orthopedic center, specialized doctors and 70 nurses who travelled all over the vast territory to reach 1,300 designated meeting points.

The traditional leper colonies, where the sick seemed like caged animals, were replaced by care at home. Thanks to mobile units that moved from village to village, every sick person was guaranteed specialized medical checkups, medicine and periodical assistance. Only the most serious cases were admitted to hospital.

The last phase of the project was aimed at the difficult health education of the lepers and the "Africanization" of the structures and health personnel: it must be said that, with the passing of the years, the program became a model for all the countries of West Africa [...].

While Fr. Fiori was speaking to me about this with great pride, I noticed a portrait of Mother Teresa hanging on his bedroom wall: he told me that he had met her during a vacation in Glasgow, when she was there for the foundation of one of her communities. He offered to drive her one evening to look for poor people living on the streets. When she noticed a huge homeless man without shoes, she asked Fr. Franco if he could give the man his shoes. He had to tell her gently that his shoes were several sizes smaller than the ones needed by the homeless man.

Fr. Franco has fond memories of his encounter with Mother Teresa and her mischievous smile. He treasures a handwritten card she sent to him with the greeting: "Dear brother Franco, belong entirely and exclusively to Jesus through Mary. May God bless you. M. Teresa m.c."

On 2 October 1979, the Superior General, Fr. Gabriele Ferrari, wrote to him expressing sentiments of trust, encouragement and admiration:

I was very pleased to hear that you will continue your work on behalf of lepers. I am sure that you will be able to do your work and satisfy the expectations of the sick people and those who work in this sector.

At the same time, residing in the house of Freetown will allow you to serve in the prisons, which is an extraordinary and special ministry that puts you in contact with the injustices of the justice system and the destiny of human beings [...].

In Freetown you will have the opportunity to attend to the service of hospitality, a service that we must offer with great joy, as the apostle Paul tells us. It is a great work of charity that we offer to all, but in a very special way to our confreres and I recommend it you [...].

I remember you to the Lord: may he grant to the grace of a serene and joyful apostolate and may you give yourself to Him more and more.



In September 1997 Fr. Franco returned to Italy to recharge his batteries. After years of work under the tropical sun, he needed some medical examinations for his diabetes, a minor operation on his legs and an aggiornamento course (the “Tre Mesi”).

He did not return to Sierra Leone: in January 1998 he was assigned to the junior seminary in Cremona. The correspondent of *Missionari Saveriani* recalls: «I can see him now at the end of the updating course, carrying his cases. He said: “They have stabbed me in the back. I was counting the days until my return to Africa and the superiors have proposed that I go to Cremona. To the north instead of the equator, to fog instead of the African sun. I can’t do this. Africa was my second heart. I spent twenty years there, some of the most demanding years of my life. I said yes, but with death in my heart. I feel uprooted, I wonder if it will work out” Knowing the faith of Fr. Franco, used as he is to seeing God’s hand in life’s events, I have no doubt that things will work out well».

Fr. Franco dedicated himself with constancy and generosity to the pastoral ministry, to missionary animation and, every afternoon, to the ministry of reconciliation in the Cathedral.

Fr. Gabriele Guarnieri says: «I remember Fr. Franco from the times I spent in the house of Cremona during my vacations in Italy. His rhythms and difficulties were dictated by his illness. At the same time, I was amazed by his strong will and he amused me with his expressions in the local dialect; I admired his dedication to the apostolate and the ministry, especially to the ministry of Reconciliation in the Cathedral of Cremona. He would sometimes invite me to his room to show me the photographs of his mission in Sierra Leone, and I was struck by how his enthusiasm and love for the mis-

sionary vocation in Africa helped him to feel that he was part of that people, that he was one of them».

In 2012 Fr. Fiori was transferred to Parma with serious health problems. He did not have an easy temperament and he found it difficult to accept his illness. He died there in the early hours of 24 October 2016.

May he rest in peace.

*Fr. Domenico Calarco S.X.*





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