

2/2017

In memoriam

Xaverian biographical profiles



Fr. Giuseppe Tanfoglio

11 October 1941 ~ 20 January 2017

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Fr. Giuseppe Tanfoglio

Comezzano-Cizzago (BS – Italy)
11 October 1941

Brescia (Italy)
20 January 2017

In memory of Fr. Giuseppe Tanfoglio, Alga Mazza, a collaborator at the CSAM in Brescia, wrote in the March 2017 issue of *Missionari Saveriani*:

Dear Fr. Tanfoglio,

I cannot believe that you are no longer physically present among us. It is something of a paradox for me, after 24 years working here in Brescia, to think of the Xaverian center without you. Everything at the CSAM speaks of you.

They placed your photograph in San Cristo¹ and I see in it the image of the prince of San Cristo. Perhaps this vision is too grandiose since grandeur does not suit missionaries, or at least it shouldn't. Grandeur means the ostentation of luxury, riches, elegance. Yet, elegance... does become you.

¹ The church of San Cristo (which today stands in the grounds of the Xaverian house in Brescia) is part of a convent complex that was built towards the end of the 15th century and it overlooks a Roman theater. Inside the church, a sole nave is richly decorated by frescoes from the fifteenth and sixteen centuries. Adjacent to the church stands a convent structured around three cloisters; the loggia of one of the cloisters offers a vast panoramic view of the city.

Elegance is knowing how to choose what to say in a pure and simple manner, knowing that one is searching for harmony with other people.

You, Fr. Tanfoglio, were always elegant, the master of the house, the prince, who welcomed visitors to your church with simplicity, gentleness and competence, without any ostentation, because San Cristo was your house. You honored the “Sistine Chapel” of Brescia with a much appreciated book², which was published in a second edition.

I cannot believe you are no longer with us. It is not possible, not only because your Spirit has truly impregnated the walls of the building, where you lived for many years. For this reason, whenever I see the old CSAM again, or think about it, you will always be there smiling, next to Our Lady’s flower-bed, watering the roses and the begonia; or you will be in the church, explaining to tourists the historical-literary nature of the various frescoes in German and French, leaving them all richer for the experience”.

Fr. Tanfoglio was born in Comezzano-Cizzago, a farming center in the province of Brescia, on 11 October 1941.

He obtained a diploma in Economics and Commerce at the Catholic University of Milan in 1962, and joined the Xaverian novitiate of the Italian Xaverian Region at the age of 21. He made his First profession in Parma on 3 October 1963. He followed the usual course of studies: Philosophy in Desio (1963–64), the first year of Theology in Parma (1964–65) and he served as prefect in Zelarino (1965–66); he completed his theology studies in Parma (1966–69), where he was ordained priest on 13 October 1968.

In presenting him to the ordained ministries, his rector wrote: «He is timid and reserved, sensitive and gentle. He was diligent in his theology studies, including their sanctifying and formative aspects. Assisted by a good intelligence, he cultivates profound convictions that are open but not dangerous, even though his reserved temperament may have prevented them from being perfected or completed».

After his ordination to the priesthood, he was assigned to Italy, where he worked as editor of *Missionari Saveriani* (1969–70), assistant General Treasurer (1970–71) and assistant to the Provincial Administration (1972–74). From 1971 until 1973 he attended the University of Parma where he graduated in Economics and Commerce.



² The book “San Cristo”, with the photographic collaboration of Fr. Fiorenzo Raffaini, is a story of words and images of the church dedicated to the Most Holy Body of Christ. In the book, Fr. Tanfoglio reconstructed the historical stages and artistic sequence of events concerning the church.

In 1974 Fr. Tanfoglio was assigned to the mission of the Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo)³. After one year studying French in Paris, he was sent first to the diocesan Seminary of Mungombe, as a teacher (1975–78) and vice-rector (1978–81), and then to Mwenga as assistant (1982–84). There is no doubt that his greatest joy was proclaiming to all, especially to those who feel they are children of no one, that they are God's children and, therefore, brothers and sisters to each other.

In the meantime he wrote in *Missionari Saveriani*, in April 1978:

I have always believed it is very important to collaborate in the formation of the local clergy, which is the bedrock of the Church [...].

The Africans have become themselves as peoples and Churches. Therefore the role of the missionary must also change: from being the founder of churches, he must become a servant of the local Church, a man of dialogue, listening and obedience.

This transformation in the country's political life and economic life already took place some time ago [...].

Community life has given me an opportunity to know the ideas and aspirations of the African clergy more profoundly. Teaching Mathematics and Latin in the seminary is important, but it is even more important to live together, to listen, tolerate and collaborate.

On 20 February 2017, Fr. Emmanuel Adili wrote about the ministry of Fr. Tanfoglio in the Congo:

Fr. Giuseppe Tanfoglio was a missionary in the Congo for just nine years, but in that time there is no doubt that he led many souls to the Lord! [...].

I was born during that period and Fr. Giuseppe baptized me on Sunday, 17 April 1983.

He proclaimed the Gospel, sowed the seed of the Good News, a seed that has produced fruits. The missionary does good by sowing the seed, just like Jesus Christ.

³ The Xaverians arrived in the Congo in 1958 when the country was well on its way to independence from Belgium. The founders of the Xaverian mission in Uvira found a Christianity of the masses and committed themselves to cultivate profound beliefs in the Christians, especially through a widespread pastoral activity in the "basic communities" and in the schools. They took special care of the young generations, forming their consciences to a sense of justice, the dignity of work and openness to others in a spirit of mercy and charity.

Currently, the Xaverians are engaged in formation, parish pastoral ministry and in specialized sectors, especially communication.

Today, I am a missionary in the same religious Family as Fr. Giuseppe. He baptized me, Fr. Vagni confirmed me and Bishop Giorgio Biguzzi ordained me to the priesthood.



Fr. Tanfoglio returned to Italy in 1984, where he served as formator in Udine (1984–85), treasurer at the CSAM in Parma (1985–92) and then in Brescia (1992–95) and, finally, as collaborator in the subscription sector of the Xaverian magazines.

In the community of Brescia, Fr. Giuseppe, who was very passionate about art, worked for the mission above all by studying and deepening the artistic treasures in the splendid church of San Cristo, the “Sistine Chapel”, that is located in the Xaverian house in Brescia; he published two important books on the church and acted as guide to many visitors from Italy and abroad.

Unfortunately, not much material is available on the spiritual and existential journey of Fr. Tanfoglio: perhaps the most interesting details have been lost. The testimony of Silvio Savoldi, which appeared in *Missionari Saveriani* in March 2017, throws some light on his person:

I met Fr. Giuseppe for the last time in San Cristo, where he was surrounded by the affection of his loved ones and of the many people who had known him.

They were all thinking the same thing: that the frescoes were looking down on a friend. Anyone who frequented the CSAM in Brescia, even just occasionally, had the impression that Giuseppe Tanfoglio was born within those walls: he was a discrete and reassuring presence, and although he tried not to draw attention to himself, he was more noticed than he would ever believe.

Reserved and not very fond of crowds, he was fully at ease only within the cloisters of his house. He would disappear in a flash and then one would see him again in some corner, watering the flowers or explaining the secrets of the frescoes of Benedetto da Marone and Lattanzio Gambara to tourists and school groups.

Those who knew the cultured and passionate Tanfoglio, the author of respected articles on the *Sistine Chapel* of Brescia, found it difficult to believe that his institutional activity was to update the records of subscribers to the missionary magazines.

During his time there, Giuseppe typed, retyped and corrected, with painstaking patience, more than one hundred thousand names of subscribers to *Missionari Saveriani*; inexplicably, he managed to love that activity too.

Every so often he would take a break and have a snack; a man with a sweet tooth, he would make short work of any sweets he found within his reach. He probably ate too many, but he would console himself by saying “my blood tests are all in order, the glucose level is low and sugar stimulates the brain’s electrical activity”.

He loved classical music and a good film, especially the most lavish and glittering blockbusters. He was fond of one film in particular: “Amarcord” by Federico Fellini. Every so often he would watch part of it and remembered with amusement the effects of the film on the French public, with whom he had seen the film for the first time in 1975.

With a no less playful spirit he sometimes recalled anecdotes of his African experience in the former Belgian Congo: he liked to play things down, but he was a good narrator and his listeners had the impression that they were present on the sun-drenched African uplands.

There is one thing about him that I never understood: although he did not have a driving license, and was therefore limited in his movements, he knew every nook and cranny of his city.

I am convinced that he never set foot in the metro system that was inaugurated in 2013, yet he knew every detail of the stations, access ramps, parking lots... However, his true home, his real kingdom in Brescia, was San Cristo, which he deeply loved.

Fr. Giuseppe left us on tiptoe just as he had lived, without disturbing anyone, but those who knew him will treasure his memory.



On 20 January 2017 the Lord called Fr. Giuseppe Tanfoglio to his eternal reward among the elect. Two days before he had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage as he was going into the chapel at the end of the day.

During a Mass in Comezzano-Cizzago for the repose of the soul of Fr. Giuseppe Tanfoglio, Fr. Mario Menin said: «I will certainly not reject anyone who comes to me” (Jn 6:37). In their brevity and incisiveness, these words spoken by Jesus in the synagogue of Capernaum nourish our hope, especially when our faith is weak and stumbles, and when our fears and anxieties seem to prevail [...].

We can however read these words into the life of Fr. Giuseppe, at this paschal hour of his departure from this world to the Father. I believe Fr. Giuseppe went to Jesus in two different ways: the first, by becoming a missionary and going to contemplate Jesus’ face in the faces of others, especially in Africa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he saw and recognized Jesus in the faces of many African brothers and sisters [...].

There is, however, a second and, perhaps, a third way in which he went to Jesus: he followed the path of beauty, of art, a passion that he cultivated especially during his time at the CSAM in Brescia. He did not travel alone on this path to Jesus; he took many people with him by studying in depth the treasure of San Cristo, the “Sistine Chapel” of Brescia, with two books and by welcoming and guiding many visitors, both from Italy and abroad, with simplicity, great competence and without any ostentation.

He leaves these two paths as his heritage: to us, his Xaverian confreres, to his relatives and to all the faithful of the parish community of Comezzano-Cizzago, where he was born and took his first steps towards Jesus, the Jesus he went to proclaim in the Democratic Republic of Congo, that same Jesus who came down from heaven in order to save everyone and raise them up on the last day».

Fr. Domenico Calarco S.X.

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