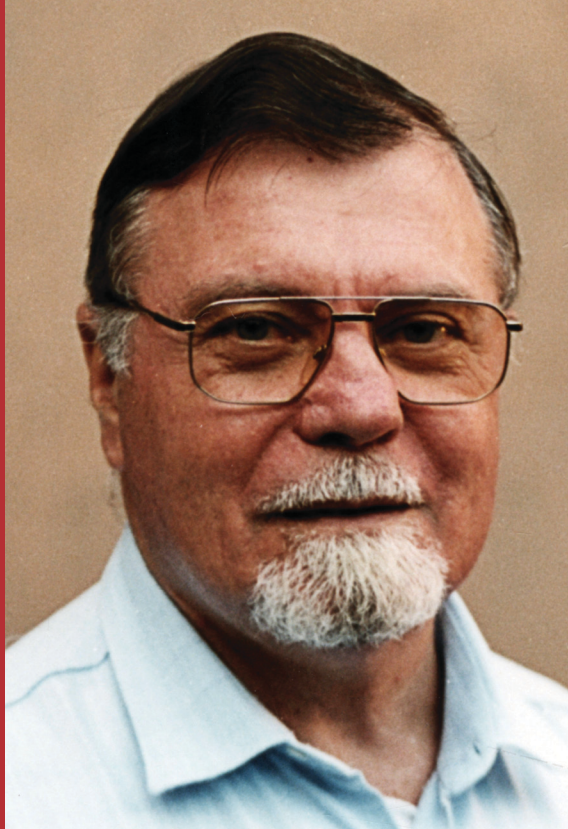


4/2017

In memoriam

Xaverian biographical profiles



Fr. Luigi Stevanin

12 October 1932 ~ 7 May 2017

In memoriam

Fr. Luigi Stevanin

San Bonifacio (VR – ITA)
12 October 1932

Parma (ITA)
7 May 2017

The characteristics that best describe Fr. Luigi Stevanin are: joyful humility and an admirable availability for service; compassion and attention to the weak, the humble and the humiliated.

He was born in San Bonifacio, in the province of Verona, on 12 October 1932. He entered the minor seminary of Vicenza at the end of elementary school, when he was 11 years old and he completed the usual course of studies: junior high school in Sovizzo (VI), where the community of Vicenza had been evacuated because of the Second World War, and senior high school in Grumone (CR).

His parish priest thus expressed his esteem and gratitude: “I can only congratulate him for his behavior and all the services he carried out for me and the parish”, Luigi entered the novitiate at San Pietro in Vincoli (RA) on 11 September 1949 and made his First Profession on 12 September 1950.

The novice master, Fr. Mario Ghezzi, thus presented him for admission to religious profession: “He is a good, modest and meek young man. He is well-liked by his companions. He is timid and reserved and has a modest intellectual ability. He is a good master of ceremonies and is very diligent in carrying out his tasks”.

Luigi wrote to the Superior General, Fr. Giovanni Gazza, on 15 August 1950, asking to be admitted to religious profession:

Reverend Father,

I, the undersigned, in the belief that this is the path the Lord wants me to take, and wishing to achieve perfection in view of the conversion of the infidels, ask freely and with all my heart to be admitted to the three-year religious profession in view of the priesthood.

I hope that the Lord will accept my poor offering and I pray that a sign of this acceptance will be my admission to the Congregation of St. Francis Xavier, which I have loved for several years as my true Mother.

In fede: *Stevanin Luigi*.

He then resumed his senior high school studies in Desio (1950–53) and Theology in Piacenza (1954–58), with an interruption of one year to serve as prefect in the minor seminary of Ancona (1953–54). He was ordained priest on 22 March 1958.

Like every good Xaverian, he dreamed of the missions. However, the Superiors assigned him to the Xaverian Region of Italy, where, from 1958 until 1969, he served as a vocation animator in the Xaverian communities of Ancona, Massa Lucana (SA) and Salerno.



In September 1969 Fr. Stevanin was assigned to the Xaverian mission of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he dedicated himself to his work with enthusiasm and consistency until 2011. But before beginning his African adventure, he spent one year in Paris studying French, which was the international official language.

In March 1970 he arrived in Burundi, in Bujumbura, where a Belgian nun taught him *Swahili*, the most widely spoken language in the eastern Congo. He then finally arrived in Congo, in the diocese of Uvira, and he remained there for 23 years.

He always worked in the pastoral ministry: at Mwenga, first, as assistant priest in the parish, then as superior and treasurer of the community and, finally, as parish priest (1970–79). From 1979 until 1982 he was treasurer of the Center in Kavinvira and assistant priest in the parish. From 1983 until 1986 he was parish priest in Luvungi, then once again in Kavinvira as parish priest and local treasurer (1986–92). After attending the “Tre Mesi” aggiornamento course in Tavernerio (CO), he served as parish priest in Bukavu-Cahi (1993–96). Finally he had a long period of service as chaplain to the prisons

of Bukavu-Kadutu and the therapeutic community of Fr. Riccardo Nardo (1997–2011).

The spirit with which he carried out these and his other activities is described by Fr. Giuseppe Veniero, who worked for many years with him in the Congo: «I will limit myself to some aspects of the personality of Fr. Luigi, which concern his long service in the Xaverian mission of the Congo. He collaborated with Fr. Nardo in the district of Kadutu with the sick or people “possessed” by evil spirits, as well as serving the central prison of Bukavu as chaplain: these were very difficult and demanding tasks from a human perspective. In these contexts that were almost impossible for other people working on humanitarian projects on behalf of the poor, Fr. Stevanin always acted according to the Gospel and with a great and patient “humanity”. His service to the house of Kadutu, which was often visited by crowds of sick people who filled the rather small courtyard, put his patience to the test. As far as I know, Fr. Luigi never complained. He served in the prison for many years in a place full of desperate men and women who were summarily condemned and ill-treated. The prisoners had to pay for everything, even to allow their family to bring them food from home. An intolerable corruption reigned there. The inmates of that prison were not protected by any law, but only by their ability to corrupt the prison directors and guards. Fr. Luigi persevered for a good number of years in this service».

Enrico Gotti, a journalist of the *Gazzetta di Parma*, remembers that «the friends of Fr. Stevanin called him the “Gigi the iceman” because he was always very calm. Indeed, he knew how to bring serenity even to the prison of Bukavu, where he served as chaplain for more than ten years. The overcrowded prison, where there was a shortage of food, was prone to rioting, and it was located in a city of 800,000 inhabitants, in the east of the country, that had been affected by two civil wars. Fr. Gabriele Cimorelli, who was also a missionary in the Congo, remembers: Fr. Luigi had gone to the Congo in 1970 and the last years as chaplain to the prison of Bukavu were years of a new life, a very happy experience. He carried out this work with great enthusiasm and great love. He took to heart the stories of all the inmates, he helped them to get food and build a new life. It was an inhuman situation and he tried to relieve their suffering. One of his characteristics was his happiness and serenity; he cheered us up even during the most difficult times in the Congo, and he continued to do so when he returned to Italy on health grounds. He had a very positive approach to life».

Fr. Luigi Lo Stocco writes: «I believe that Fr. Luigi shared my sentiments as he made his way Mwenga, in Urega: that is to say, he was walking over a land soaked with so much innocent blood and which was begging for peace and

prosperity. The massacres carried out by the Mulela rebellion had shed much blood, including that of many men and women religious, all in the futile search for a futile and illusive supremacy. Three of our confreres had been murdered along with a priest in Baraka, in Ubembe [...]. Fr. Stevanin had arrived in the Congo that was still suffering the consequences of these traumas and the many deep wounds that would take decades to heal and, perhaps, be forgotten».

Fr. Stevanin teaches us “the evangelical law of losing in order to find, of the joy of giving instead of receiving, of being ready to serve the little ones who suffer, and offer a glass of water to the thirsty in order to be certain that we have not lived in vain”.



On 15 April 1983, Fr. Stevanin wrote to Fr. Gabriele Ferrari, the Superior General:

I thank you for the letter marking my 25th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood. I was expecting it and, although it arrived after the event, I was very pleased to receive it.

Here I organized the “celebration” on my own and Jesus’ contribution made it better.

On 22 March, at 6.30 am, I celebrated in the Sanctuary of Kavinvira with the sisters of St. Gemma and a few members of the faithful. After the celebration of Mass I went to take the Easter sacraments to about ten sick and elderly people.

Everything went well. Except that, when I was coming out of the last house, the car refused to start and I was forced to walk under the midday sun for about half an hour, leaving the owner of the garage of Uvira the job of towing the car home.

The only inconvenience was that, when I returned, the community had already eaten lunch and so I ate my “celebratory” lunch hastily, as one does when one arrives late. In the afternoon, I went to an outstation for confessions in preparation to Easter and to celebrate the second Mass.

To conclude, after dinner, I was expecting the confreres to open a bottle and celebrate my silver anniversary, but they had gone to a meeting of the catechists, so I opened the bottle alone and drank to the health of everyone. That is how I spent the day!

Then Holy Week arrived and there was a great deal of work to do with the Christians and to get the 150 candidates ready for baptism.

I am happy to be a Xaverian, in spite of the many past difficulties, especially in these recent years here in Kavinvira.

On 27 October 1997, Fr. Stevanin wrote to the Superior General, Fr. Francesco Marini, to thank him for his birthday greetings and inform him about the apostolic work in Bukavu-Kadutu:

Thank you for your birthday greetings.

Here, in Bukavu-Kadutu, we are organizing things well. The other day, Bishop Kataliko came to visit us and he was very happy. He promised he will come back.

They wanted us to leave from Cahu and the Lord prepared a better place for us here in Kadutu. We will now wait and see how we can insert ourselves into the pastoral ministry in Kadutu.

In the meantime I have visited the sick and the elderly of the district amidst the smelly and slippery labyrinths of this area. The rains have arrived and, although they have cleaned some things up, they have also increased the mud.

We are now getting ready to mark the first anniversary of the murder-martyrdom of Bishop Munzihirwa, who loved the poor and denounced the plundering of the Congo.

Ask the Lord in prayer to grant us peace.

On 26 October 2000, he wrote once again to the Superior General, Fr. Francesco Marini:

On my return to Bukavu, I found your very welcome letter of greetings for my 50th anniversary of profession. May the Lord fill you with his graces!

On 12 September I was still in Italy and so I went to the Sanctuary of Monte Berico to thank the Lord and Our Lady. There I celebrated the Mass of thanksgiving and I benefitted from the grace of the Jubilee.

Undoubtedly, on that 12 September 1950, I could never have imagined what the Lord of the Vineyard had in store for me... and now, as I look back at the years that have passed I first thank the Lord with my whole heart, and then all who have helped me to walk with Him.

Here we are still living among many thorns, but the roses will certainly blossom because the Lord cannot leave so many people in such inhuman situations for a long time.

Continue to pray and to carry your cross, following Jesus along the "Via Crucis" that leads to the Resurrection. My greetings to all the confreres in Rome.



In September 2011, Fr. Stevanin began to experience serious health problems and he had to return to Italy. For three years he received nursing care in the Mother House, Parma.

At 12:10 on 7 May 2017, Good Shepherd Sunday, the soul of Fr. Luigi Stevanin was freed from infirmity and responded to the Divine Shepherd who called him to Himself.

«Fr. Luigi Stevanin has left an indelible memory. So many people will remember him, especially his love. It was wonderful to meet him and talk about our activities and our projects and, above all, about our Congolese people, who are so passionate, yet also so difficult to understand. The human heart is always a great mystery and the African heart is even more mysterious. Rest in peace, my beloved brother, and pray for us » (*Fr. Luigi Lo Stocco sx*).

Fr. Domenico Calarco s.x.

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