

5/2017

# In memoriam

Xaverian biographical profiles



## Fr. Otello Casali

20 December 1934 ~ 10 May 2017



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## Fr. Otello Casali

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*Castelvecchio – Prignano Secchia (MO – ITA)*  
*20 December 1934*

*Padang (Indonesia)*  
*10 May 2017*

On 6 April 1954, Otello Casali, wrote to the Superior General, Fr. Giovanni Gazza: «I am a seminarian in the third year of Lyceum and for several years now I have felt the desire to give myself totally to the Lord so that He can make me an “alter Christus”, who can win over souls to Him.

My helplessness and my weaknesses have ...forced me to remain in the Seminary, but, finally, despite my infinite unworthiness and nothingness, I now have the boldness, to present myself to you, Reverend Father, trusting and abandoning myself to our Heavenly Mother, to tell you about my deep desire to become a missionary!

Despite my pride, I feel unworthy to belong to a missionary Institute, but the love of our Heavenly Mother consoles me, strengthens me and gives me the courage to present my humble and passionate desire to you, Reverend Father.

Forgive the boldness of my self-presentation, but I greatly need advice and encouragement and I am sure that you will help me [...].

I would be most honored if you consider me worthy of your advice».

These words give us a glimpse of what was the guiding principle of each and every stage of Fr. Casali's human and spiritual life.

He was born in Castelvocchio, in the province of Modena, on 20 December 1934, in a well-off farming family.

It seemed that Otello was destined to take over the running of the family farms, which had been extended by the parents. However, after attending the first year of high school, he followed the voice of the Lord who was calling him to the seminary of Albinea, in the province of Reggio Emilia, which he joined at the age of 12.

In the meantime he felt himself more and more “conquered” by Jesus «to win over new lands for His Kingdom». Attracted by the heroism of Fr. Alfeo Emaldi, who «had come back from China after cutting his tongue in the communist prisons to prevent himself from revealing the names of the Christians», by the example of other Xaverians in China and after meeting Fr. Domenico Milani, the director of the *Centro Educazione Missionaria* (CEM), on 11 September 1954, when he was 20 years old, Otello entered the novitiate of San Pietro in Vincoli, in the province of Ravenna. In connection with this, he wrote to the Superior General, Fr. Giovanni Gazza:

At home we have spoken often about my decision, considering all its pros and cons.

My mother often cries because of the detachment this entails, but she tells me: “If the Lord is calling you, then you must go”. My father is less well disposed and resigned to God’s will and he is unable to understand why I prefer the dark, primitive Africa, or violent China, to a parish with a good income.

Young Otello made his first vows on 12 September 1955. He resume his Theology studies, first in Piacenza (1955–58) and then in Parma (1958–59), and he made his final vows on 20 September 1958; he was ordained priest on 21 December 1958.

From 1959 until 1965, Fr. Otello served in two Xaverian communities in Sardinia: in Macomer as a teacher and in Cagliari as vice-rector and in the propaganda sector. There «he learned to sweat in order to earn bread for our students».



In October 1965 the Superiors assigned him to Indonesia — “the Mission of 15.000 islands” —, where he carried out his pastoral activity from 1966 until 1983 and then from 1986 until 2017.

After studying the Indonesian language, Fr. Otello was assistant priest (1966–68) and parish priest (1974–81) in Pekan Baru, parish priest in Bagan-siapi-Api (1968–71), in Dumai (1971–74) and Padang Baru (1981–83).

He said to his friends: «It would take too long to tell where and how I worked in the mission. I have lived among the Chinese and, above all, among the *minangkabau* of the island of Sumatra. On my arrival in 1966, there were about 5.000 Christians in the three parishes. In order to reach the village of Air Molek (which means sweet water, a delightful name, even though the place was infested with mosquitoes, tigers, elephants and every kind of serpents!), where I resided, it was necessary to sail in a small boat and then travel overland along the only road, which was often reduced to a swamp. When things went smoothly, three days of hardship were necessary to complete the journey».

He also worked all-out in Riao — a region the size of northern Italy — in the field of development. In connection with this, on 20 September 2015, he wrote to the Superior General, Fr. Luigi Menegazzo:

My DNA, which I inherited from my father, drove me to acquire some vast terrains that have now been transformed into large churches, schools and medical dispensaries.

Two weeks ago, we had the joy of seeing the Bishop consecrate a large church that can hold more than two thousand people, while in the surrounding areas another two large churches are being completed.

It is quite a positive moment, thanks to the prudence of the new President who keeps the fanatical Muslims at bay.

In March 1980, Fr. Otello wrote to the Regional Superior, Fr. Giovanni Ferrari:

Following the latest political developments and the new orientations of our beloved Indonesia, and after carefully pondering the directives of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference, I intend to apply for Indonesian citizenship so that I can contribute to the development of the Indonesian Church for a longer period of time, without the hassle of applying for visas.

I am applying for Indonesian citizenship freely and lucidly, without any pressure, and motivated solely by the desire to contribute to the good of the Indonesian Church.

This request entailed giving up his Italian citizenship. He wrote: «when I return to Italy, my native country, I am treated like an immigrant without any civil rights. They grant me a permit to stay for three months and do not even guarantee me hospital care. So much for equal rights!».



In April 1983 Fr. Otello was called back to Italy, where he worked as rector of the Salerno community (1983–86).

In October 1986 the Superiors assigned him again to Indonesia, where he worked in parish pastoral ministry as parish priest in Kota Baru (1987–88), Dumai (1988–95), Toasebio (1997–2000), Padang Baru (2003–06) and Bukittinggi (2006–12). For two periods he also served as the mission procurator (1995–97 and 2000–02).

Fr. Franco Qualizza recalls: In 2011, the Xaverian community of Pekan Baru lost Fr. Ottorino Monaci and, a few months later, I was taken into hospital.

Despite his own frail health, as soon as he found out about the precarious situation of our community, Fr. Otello immediately telephoned me and asked if he could come and help us. That gesture moved me because I knew that he too needed to rest at that time.

He remained until the end of March and was always available for any kind of pastoral service. He spared no effort to help the poorest and most needy people. He often went the extra mile provided he could be of service to others.

In the last period he spent with us, he dedicated himself especially to the apostolate of the sick, a valuable service that he carried out with love and dedication.

For health reasons, Fr. Otello lived in the Regional House in Padang from 2012 until 2015. At the beginning of 2015, he was assigned once again to Pekan Baru, as assistant priest in S. Paulus, Labuh. In connection with this, he wrote to the Superior General, Fr. Luigi Menegazzo, on 20 September 2015:

I am in Pekan Baru because I only have enough strength to do light work, such as visiting the sick, accompanied by some good members of the faithful.

My heart inspires me to remain here in Pekan Baru, which was my first residence when I arrived in September 1965 and where I spent the longest period of my 50 years in the Mission.

Thinking back over these long years, I can see how the Lord has been always guiding me since I was a child.

From a period of intense and varied apostolic work to cultural *aggiornamento* and ongoing formation: this was an obligatory step that Fr. Otello complied with, by attending the “Tre Mesi” of *aggiornamento* in Tavernerio (CO) in 1999 and in 2008, to seek and discover God’s will for his life under the purifying and sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit.

The Regional Superior of Indonesia, Fr. Antonius Wahyudiyanto, writes: it was a pleasure to know Fr. Otello Casali. We had both taken part in the “Tre Mesi” in Tavernerio (CO) in 2008.

We were unable to take part in the end-of-course pilgrimage to the Holy Land because of problems with our Indonesian passports. We were both disappointed and shared the same misfortune. We therefore organized things in a different manner and spent two weeks together.

One day, Fr. Franco Bertazza suggested we go on a trip to Macugnaga, beneath Monte Rosa, to enjoy the snow and that trip made him happy.

The following day we went to Cremona, the home town of Fr. Giovanni Lazzari, whom I knew well. We visited the city, admiring its beauty, its famous torrazzo, the shops that sold torrone and the famous Stardivari violin.

The best experience was the pilgrimage to Lourdes. I told him it would make up for not going to the Holy Land. We had not seen the grotto of Bethlehem, but we could always pray at the grotto of Lourdes.

When I was elected Regional Superior, Fr. Otello asked me to send him to the parish of St. Paul, in Pekan Baru, to serve the people there.

Despite the fact that he no longer enjoyed good health, he diligently went to the various districts to visit and console the suffering. He also closely monitored the construction of some churches.

About three months before his death, Fr. Otello went to some doctors in Jakarta and Pekan Baru to receive some intense medical treatment. In the period January-February 2017, we decided it would be better to move him to Biara, in Padang, with us Xaverians.

For me it was a privilege to serve him. He always said “Thank you!” when I helped him, or “Forgive me!” when he thought he had caused some problem.

In the meantime his health deteriorated and he was forced to use a wheelchair. He was admitted to the Yos Sudarso Hospital in Padang and died there on 10 May 2017.

Fr. Antonius writes: «I think that God chose the best moment to call him into His Kingdom. Fr. Casali taught me what faith in God is like, from him I learned patience, service and love for the sick and the elderly. Thank you, Fr. Otello, for your prayers and the good times we spent together. We will meet each other again in heaven». We too join him in expressing our gratitude to Fr. Otello.

*Fr. Domenico Calarco S.X.*







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