

BLESSED PAOLO MANNA (1872-1952)

“In Father Paolo Manna, we see a special reflection of the glory of God. He spent his entire life for the missionary cause. On every page of his writings the person of Jesus emerges as alive, the center of life and the *raison d'être* of mission.”

These words of St. John Paul II, spoken during his homily for the beatification of Father Manna on November 4, 2001, summarize the spiritual portrait of this great apostle of evangelization *ad gentes*, considered by scholars to be a precursor of the Second Vatican Council.

Paolo Antonio Manna was born in Avellino, Italy, on January 16, 1872, the fifth of six children. After elementary and technical studies in Avellino and Naples, he continued his studies in Rome. While studying philosophy at the Gregorian University, he heard the Lord's call to missionary life and entered the seminary of the Institute for Foreign Missions in Milan, where he completed his theological studies. He was ordained a priest in the cathedral of Milan on May 19, 1894.

His superiors sent him to Burma (now Myanmar) and on September 27, 1895, he left, for the Toungoo mission. Although suffering from poor health, he pushed himself with tireless dedication in the evangelization¹ and human development of the Carian peoples (in particular the Ghekhù, about whom he later wrote a well-noted book). Exhaustion from his travels, malarial fever, and the onset of tuberculosis forced him to return home on July 7, 1907.

¹ Father Manna even evangelized the parents of the first beatified native of Burma (now Myanmar), Isidoro Ngei Ko Lat, a catechist who was martyred together with Fr. Mario Vergara, PIME. The two were beatified together on May 24, 2014, in the cathedral of Aversa, Italy.

In Italy, Fr. Paolo threw himself headlong into an intense and diversified schedule of missionary work, putting to good use his skills as an acute observer of the ecclesial landscape on a global level, lecturer, publicist, and learned writer. “The whole Church for the whole world” became his motto. As “a soul of fire,”² he infused his books with an ardent vision of faith as it related to the multiple and complex problems of the mission *ad gentes*. He offered bold and penetrating analyses, with intuitions that have at times been judged by scholars to be “prophetic.”

In 1909, he was appointed director of the magazine *Le Missioni Cattoliche*, which acquired new impetus through his expert and dynamic leadership. He published pamphlets and books and wrote articles on missionary themes that were near and dear to his heart. He launched various initiatives of missionary cooperation: adoptions, scholarships, and leaflets of prayers for the missions. He founded new periodicals, such as *Propaganda missionaria* for families, *Italia missionaria* for young people, and, later, *Venga il Tuo Regno*, also for families, especially in southern Italy.

In 1915, Father Manna took the first steps towards the foundation of the Missionary Union of the Clergy (today PUM), which Pope Pius XII called “the gem of his life.” Decisive support for the realization of this project came from Bishop Guido Maria Conforti, the bishop of Parma and founder of the Xaverian Missionaries who was canonized in 2011. The statutes of the Union, presented to the Pope by Conforti himself, were approved on October 31, 1916. In his Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (1919), Benedict XV praised the Missionary Union of the Clergy, expressing the desire that it be “instituted in all the dioceses of the Catholic world.”

The basic idea, fully shared by Bishop Conforti, was that to set the whole people of God in a state of mission, it was necessary to start with the clergy. Father Paolo was convinced that “every priest by nature, by definition, is a missionary,” but he constantly needs to revive the flame of apostolic zeal in

² This is what Manna was called by Father Gian Battista Tragella (1885-1968), a famous missiologist, historian of PIME, a great friend and collaborator of Manna, and his first biographer.

his heart. “The missionary is the man of faith *par excellence*: born of faith, living by faith, for this he willingly works, suffers, and dies... Without faith the missionary cannot be explained and does not exist; and, if he exists, he is not a true missionary of Jesus Christ” (Manna, *Virtù Apostoliche – Lettere ai missionari*, EMI, Bologna 1997, 89).

In 1924, Manna was entrusted with the new and particularly demanding responsibility of serving as Superior General of the Institute of Foreign Missions of Milan, which became the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) in 1926 at the behest of Pius XI, who joined it to the similar Missionary Seminary of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Rome. In the ten years he led the organization, Manna’s missionary passion was revealed above all in “family conversations,” letter-meditations addressed to his confreres and published in a bulletin called *Il Vincolo*, which provided inspiration, information, and communication between PIME members throughout the world. Later collected in a book called *Virtù Apostoliche*, these writings are considered to be a classical expression of missionary spirituality.

Father Paolo was strongly convinced of the central role of prayer in the life of the missionary. “Be men of interior life, men of prayer.... It is worth knowing how to preach, but it is worth much more to know how to pray. The missionary who knows the language well and knows how to preach, but who prays little, will expound the truth of our holy religion excellently, but will leave souls cold. The missionary who has deep intimacy with God in prayer, even if his exposition leaves something to be desired, will always have the gift of transfusing the spirit of Jesus Christ into souls, which is after all what preaching must first obtain. The first will teach about Jesus Christ, the other will reveal him. You make the difference! ‘If he who teaches is not a person of interior life, his tongue will say empty things’ (St. Gregory)” (Manna, *Virtù Apostoliche*, 100).

Manna’s thought was enriched and clarified following a long missionary journey to the East which lasted about two years (1927-1929). His obser-

vation of the diverse realities he encountered – environmental, cultural and ecclesial – and his meetings with numerous people and missionaries in the field would lead to ninety pages of notes, comments and daring innovative proposals that were entitled *Osservazioni sul metodo moderno di evangelizzazione* (Observations on the modern method of evangelization). These writings, sent to *Propaganda Fide*, would remain unpublished until 1977.

In 1934, having finished his service as Superior General of the Institute, he began another great work, the founding of a new women’s missionary community, the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. This work went forward following the mandate of the PIME General Assembly and was completed by his successor, Bishop Lorenzo Maria Balconi in Milan on December 8, 1936. This new women’s institute recognized Father Manna as the one who “inspired” its missionary charism.

From 1937 to 1941, Father Manna was the international secretary of the Missionary Union of the Clergy. He maintained a network of relationships with Apostolic Nuncios, bishops, and priests from all over the world. He continued to write letters, books, and articles. Particularly sensitive to the problems posed by the divisions among Christians, he became a “prophet of ecumenism.” In 1941, he published *I fratelli separati e noi* (The Separated Brethren and Us), which was also published in several other languages. The work was well received among non-Catholic Christians, both in the East and the West, even if their positions remained distant. In 1950, he wrote *Le nostre Chiese e la propagazione del Vangelo* [Our Churches and the propagation of the Gospel], and the ideas contained in this work were taken up by Pope Pius XII in the Encyclical *Fidei Donum*.

Father Paolo Manna died in Naples on September 15, 1952, and his martyred remains rest in the city of Ducenta. He was beatified by John Paul II on November 4, 2001.