

Introduction to the Original Italian Publication of 1983

The diaries of the first Consolata missionaries in East Africa are the main sources of this work. These diaries are written on simple notebooks and even on pocketbooks, usually by pen but sometimes using a pencil. They constitute an archival collection of about 13,000 still unexplored pages and span from 1902 to 1911. In the present work, only those that interest the years of the present research, or are closely related to them, are considered. In fact, the survey examines most of the diaries because from 1902 to 1905, fourteen out of fifteen missionaries wrote their diary, though with varying regularity.¹ Those who were “faithful to the diary” were only six in 1904, to whom were added four Vincentian Sisters of the Little House of Divine Providence (Cottolengo). A certain recovery took place in 1905 with nine missionaries compiling their diaries, but the number rapidly declined in 1906. The editors were only three. Even in the following years, the editorial fidelity to these diaries was rather poor. In 1907 only four missionaries composed the diary; in 1908 five; nobody in 1909; two in 1910 and one – the last one – in 1911.

To evaluate this phenomenon, we must consider that the choice of writing or not writing the diary was not the outcome of a free initiative, but rather a requirement strongly recommended by article 14 of the Rules of the Missionaries:

Each missionary is required to compose a diary from the day of his departure and throughout all the time spent in the missions. This diary will contain news about his health, his impressions of travel, his apostolic activities, the progress of the mission he is in charge of, the local customs, the news of geography, ethnography, natural history, etc. and it must be sent to the Local General Superior at least once every six months.²

In this regard, Fr. Iginio Tubaldo also noted:

It should also be noted that after the death of Allamano, some diaries were taken away by the interested parties, others were tampered with following

¹ The Diary of Fr. Tommaso Gays is totally missing.

² AIMC III-4/1/1 – Regulation 1901, p. 34.

the bombing of the Mother House during the Last War. However, the material that remained is noteworthy and constitutes a very important archival wealth.³

What Allamano expected from the diaries by number 14 of the Regulations is of great importance in determining the historical value they were to achieve. In fact, in the circular letter of January 6, 1905, he wrote:

Another thing that has more importance than what it seems, at first glance, and for which I urge you to find the time, even on very busy days, is the compilation of the diary, but in a way that serves the purpose which the regulation prescribes [...] What is more necessary to report in the diary, are the habits and ideas of the indigenous people as you come to know them, and your relationships with them. Report how they receive your words, what impressions your words make on them; their conversations, their sayings, the questions and objections they make to you regarding the truths of faith. Therefore, for example, I know that you have travelled everywhere to cure the sick. It is impossible to do so without the exchange of interesting conversations. It may be the story that gave rise to their ills, or the religious teachings you have made to them.

What about infant baptisms? Thank God, they already took place in all the mission stations, yet in the diaries there are just a few details on these facts. It would be so important and useful for our benefactors to know about them.

It is impossible for me to enumerate here what you have to say. It is enough to remember what newspaper reports usually do and their detailed descriptions of the facts that have taken place.

Surely, you are not expected to write about all the meetings that happen during the day, but at least it is to be thoroughly done for those things that are more original and somewhat interesting.

On the subject of the diary, I do not approve that it is habitually done in the evening after dinner, as someone does. This is harmful to your health, so you will have to find some other time to do it before dinner.⁴

In the same year, Fr. Filippo Perlo was elected Superior of the Consolata missions in Kenya. In one of his letters to the missionaries, he reproduced some extracts from a letter written by Allamano on the need to write the diaries. He said:

³ TUBALDO I., *Una fruttuosa iniziativa per la stampa e la conoscenza delle missioni*, in *Il Servo di Dio Giuseppe Allamano, Tesoriere della Consolata*, 16 (1975), p. 13.

⁴ AIMC Fondo Allamano – Folder 20B, corr. att., circular letter 6/1/1905.

Diaries – Even here I cannot do better than what the Very Rev. Rector wrote in his last letter: “To meet the expenses of the missions, the Vice-Rector (Giacomo Camisassa) generously offers to the missions the proceeds of the publication of the periodical; but, as in all things, even in this, the world needs to have an interest in it. Therefore, since the periodical now deals almost exclusively with the missions, this must be done in such a way that everyone may enjoy it; yet, how can this be accomplished if the letters and the diaries are so scarce and incomplete? It is, therefore, a necessary priority, as the bread you need, that everyone, regarding the diaries, should adhere to the following norms, as you will complete and better explain at your place, etc.”.

- 1) Detailed descriptions of individual locations, plants, animals, products, etc.
- 2) Inhabitants, nature, customs, practices of superstition in the various circumstances of life, births, marriages, illnesses, deaths etc., religious opinions, celebrations, etc.
- 3) Your relationships with them, and theirs with you, and very detailed account of conversations, etc.

We must imagine the common desire to know every detail about baptisms. Consequently, in approaching them, first suspicious, then a little more compliant, then curious to know religious things and all those childish questions that they ask and finally, the outcome of the catechisms. In short, many well-detailed anecdotes are needed. I very well know that many do not believe they are capable of this, but it is not true. You should encourage them as a matter of duty and of great glory of God for the work of the missions.⁵

Furthermore, since the diaries are personally intended for Allamano, the missionaries can also entrust to them the personal experiences, doubts and difficulties, for which they wish to seek the Rector’s advice, certain of his discretion and respect.

Fr. Tubaldo rightly concludes his analysis of the diaries by saying:

The Fathers and the Brothers wrote their diaries as if they were long letters to the Founder. Even from this point of view, they have a great value, as well as from a historical and scientific point of view.⁶

Naturally, this value varies from author to author, depending on the literary-academic preparation and the work done in the missions. Hence, there is a notable difference between the diaries of Fathers (Frs.) Filippo Perlo, Borda Bossana, Bertagna, Barlassina and Seminarian (Sem.) Cravero – all of

⁵ This text is not found in Allamano’s correspondence but it is quoted by Fr. F. Perlo in a letter of 02/02/1905: see TUBALDO I., *Una fruttuosa iniziativa*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

them with remarkable talents and incisive and far-sighted pastoral initiatives – and those of other missionaries who are engaged in manual activities or are scarcely prone to conceptual work. The observations of Fr. Filippo Perlo – thanks to his qualities as a writer, his exceptional organisational skills and his office as a treasurer, to which he later added that of Superior – make his diaries particularly interesting and important. Currently, they are doing a typed transcription of the diaries because the difficult handwriting is compounded by the precarious situations in which the diaries were often written (dust from the African red earth is still found between the pages). The paper, ruined by the wear and tear of the time, by the humidity and frequent use of the pencil, caused serious difficulty in reading them. Although the originals have been consulted, the quotations of the diaries of Fathers Perlo, A. Borda Bossana and G. Barlassina are taken from their transcriptions because this facilitates their placement. Moreover, since the numbering of the pages is not marked in a progressive order – only Fr. Gabriele Perlo did this – the references indicate that of the individual notebooks, and when this too is missing, the dates are indicated. The words in brackets, which follow the references, are usually archive additions.

Except for a few cases, the language of the diaries is twisted and full of dialectal expressions which give the impression of a translation from the Piedmontese dialect. In fact, they had no literary pretence, they were born out of everyday life in a family atmosphere, the limits of which they did not intend to cross.