

# PRESENZA AGOSTINIANA



Digital Edition

January/February 2026 - no 1

## DISCALCED AUGUSTINIANS IN MISSION



### Mission and Theology

Sacred Scripture  
and History of the Church

### Mission *ad gentes*

Integral part of the  
Discalced Augustinian Spirituality

### Mission Yesterday

Historical, Biographical and Cultural  
Elements of Tonkin in the 17th century

### Mission Today

Discalced Augustinians  
in Cameroon and Southeast Asia





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# Editorial

## The Discalced Augustinians and the Mission *ad gentes*

Dear Readers,

with this issue of *Presenza Agostiniana*, we return to reflect on the missionary dimension of the Order, in continuity with vol. 126 (May/October 1997), which commemorated the 3rd centenary of our missions during a special Jubilee Year. We invite our readers to revisit that issue, which remains a valuable point of reference for understanding the roots and development of our missionary presence.

The present edition offers an organic journey that weaves together theological foundation, historical memory, and contemporary reality.

It opens with *Theology of Mission*, offering a perspective rooted in Sacred Scripture and in the History of the Church's missionary activity. This is followed by *Mission ad gentes*, reread in the light of the Augustinian charism and spirituality. *Discalced Augustinians in Mission* traces the theological and missionary path of the Order. A specific focus is dedicated to *OAD Mission in Tonkin in the 17th century*, providing a historical

and documentary synthesis of the first Asian experiences. Finally, the articles on the *OAD Mission Today*, highlighting our presence in Southeast Asia and in Cameroon, presents both continuity and new pastoral challenges.

Memory, reflection, and commitment are interwoven throughout these pages, reminding us that mission does not belong only to the past of the Order, but constitutes a living and enduring dimension of its vocation within the Church.

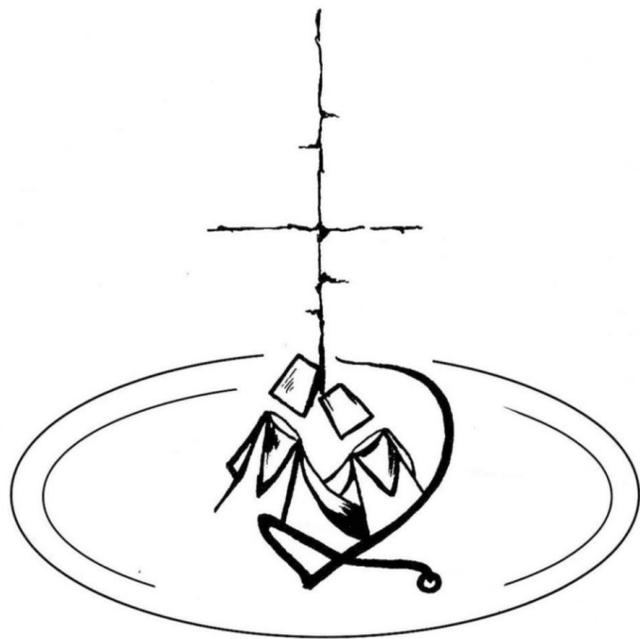
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# presenza agostiniana

AGOSTINIANI SCALZI



*Servire l'Altissimo  
in spirito di umiltà*



3-5  
Maggio-Ottobre  
1997

*3° Centenario  
Missioni O. A. D.*



Storia

## GLI AGOSTINIANI SCALZI NEL VIETNAM E NELLA CINA

Pietro Scalia, OAD

### Premessa

La storia delle missioni degli agostiniani scalzi in Oriente (Vietnam e Cina) comprende un arco di oltre 120 anni: inizia il 6 dicembre 1696 con l'accettazione da parte della Congregazione di Propaganda Fide dei primi due missionari, P. Alfonso Romano della Madre di Dio e P. Giovanni Mancini dei Ss. Agostino e Monica, e si conclude il 29 gennaio 1821 con la morte dell'ultimo missionario, P. Adeodato di S. Agostino, avvenuta in Manila, dove egli si era rifugiato dopo la sua espulsione dalla Cina. Un arco di storia certamente luminoso e ricco di frutti, che onora indubbiamente l'Ordine, segnandone forse la pagina più significativa. Storia, però, che per anni è rimasta quasi nascosta, come un fuoco che cova sotto la cenere, in attesa di essere riattivato.

Il merito di aver riscoperto questo fuoco nascosto va all'opera indefessa di P. Ignazio Barbagallo<sup>1</sup>, al quale l'Ordine deve eterna riconoscenza: nella sua vasta opera di ricerca storica non ha trascurato di riscoprire tutte le lettere dei nostri missionari, ed altri docu-

<sup>1</sup> P. IGNAZIO BARBAGALLO, OAD, nacque a S. Giovanni La Punta (CT) il 13 agosto 1914 e qui morì il 15 settembre 1982. Entrò giovanissimo nell'Ordine e vi ricoprì diverse cariche importanti, quali: Definitor Generale, Priore Provinciale, Maestro dei novizi e dei chierici. Dotato di rara intelligenza, di luminosa memoria, di coraggio e di costanza certosina, ha passato buona parte della sua vita in un impegno instancabile alla ricerca della memoria storica dell'Ordine, nonostante le sue malattie, fra cui una forte forma asmatica che lo costringeva a terapie continue e fastidiose. Da questa sua passione e da una indefessa ricerca archivistica sono nate diverse pubblicazioni sulla spiritualità e sulla storia dell'Ordine, che ne hanno ampiamente arricchito il patrimonio culturale. Per il suo impulso, soprattutto negli anni in cui era maestro nel mercato generale di Gesù e Maria, si è risvegliato nei giovani religiosi l'amore alla storia e l'entusiasmo per il carisma dell'Ordine. Non ha trascurato di interessarsi alla ricerca storica più in generale, con due importanti pubblicazioni: "Frosinone, lineamenti storici dalle origini ai nostri giorni", Frosinone 1975, pp. 468, e "S. Gregorio da Sassola dall'antichità ai nostri giorni", Tivoli 1982, pp. 320. Ha scritto inoltre diverse biografie e libri di spiritualità per altri Istituti religiosi. Forse le cose più pregevoli sono ancora nascoste nel ricchissimo archivio personale, quasi totalmente inedito ed inesplorato, che attualmente si trova nella casa generalizia. In altra parte riportiamo una bibliografia essenziale delle sue pubblicazioni di storia e spiritualità dell'Ordine.

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Spiritualità

## LA SPIRITUALITÀ MISSIONARIA DEGLI AGOSTINIANI SCALZI

Gabriele Ferlisi, OAD

### I - FASCINO E SOFFERENZA DELLE MISSIONI

La "storia delle missioni" è certamente una delle pagine più belle ed esaltanti, ma anche più sofferte e incomprensibili, della Chiesa nella sua lunga storia bimillenaria. Essa riflette gli stessi chiaroscuri e la dialettica interna della "storia della missione" della Chiesa. Infatti, l'una e l'altra, "storia delle missioni" e "storia della missione", pur non identificandosi, di fatto si richiamano e si spiegano a vicenda. La storia delle attività dà concretezza allo spirito missionario, la dimensione missionaria postula e dà valore alle iniziative apostoliche. Filantropia e carità, socialità e soprannaturalità, amore del prossimo e amore di Dio si richiamano e si completano.

#### 1. Il fascino

Il fascino proprio di questa complessa storia missionaria si deve soprattutto al fatto che essa è storia di amore, scritta a caratteri d'oro dall'eroismo di quanti generosamente e con innumerevoli sacrifici hanno messo la propria vita a totale servizio del Vangelo. I missionari! Sono essi gli autori concreti della splendida pagina missionaria della Chiesa; gli uomini che fanno la storia; gli storici credibili che scrivono di proprio pugno da testimoni, non da studiosi. Sono essi - uomini e donne - le persone straordinarie che commuovono ed esaltano, e non per altro motivo se non perché sono semplici e coraggiose, umili e intrepide, ricche di fede e di immaginazione, essenziali, determinate, generose, altruiste.

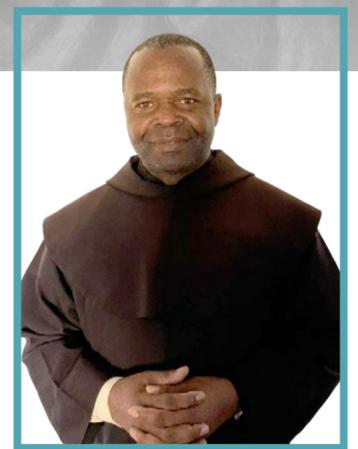
La forza del loro impegno è di aver capito il valore oblativo della vita, cioè che essa è dono ricevuto da ridonare, progetto di salvezza e promozione integrale della dignità dell'uomo, per cui vale la pena donarsi radicalmente senza risparmio<sup>1</sup>.

Più precisamente, la loro forza è di aver preso sul serio Cristo e la Chiesa: Cristo, il pri-

<sup>1</sup> Confess. 10,43,70.

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Read the special issue of *Presenza Agostiniana*  
dedicated to the 3rd Centenary of the OAD Missions: vol. 126, May/October 1997



# Teology of Mission

## A View of Sacred Scripture and History of the Church

Fr. Michael Tukov Womela, oad

Mission is not a secondary activity of the Church, nor an initiative born of contingent historical needs. It has its roots in the very heart of God, who reveals Himself as the One who loves, seeks, and saves humanity. The theology of mission therefore arises from the history of salvation and unfolds throughout the centuries in the life of the Church. This contribution seeks to offer a biblical and historical synthesis of missionary dynamism, showing how it is an integral part of Christian identity.

### 1. Sacred Scripture

#### a) God, the First Missionary

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that God created us in **love** and for love (CCC 1). Love is the principle of His action toward humanity (1 Jn 4:8).

After the fall of Adam, the first gesture of God is a missionary gesture: He descends into the garden not to condemn, but to seek the man and to re-establish a **new relationship**: “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9). Already

here the dynamic of mission is visible: God takes the initiative, goes out to meet man, and promises him salvation (Gen 3:15). Thus, in the biblical perspective, God is the first missionary.

#### b) Israel, a People Chosen for Mission

In His divine pedagogy, God chooses Israel as the people of the covenant (Gen 12:1–3; Ex 19:5–6), with a view to a mission.

The prophet Hosea describes this relationship with the **nuptial image**: Israel is loved by God from childhood, liberated from slavery and guided toward the promised land, despite her infidelities: “When Israel was a child, I loved him” (Hos 11:1). God promises a time of return and liberation: “They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from Assyria” (Hos 11:11).

Israel is not chosen for privilege, but for **service**; the call to be a light to the nations, which Isaiah expresses in decisive words: “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Is 49:6).



Israel thus becomes a figure and anticipation of Christ, in whom mission finds its fulfillment. Benedict XVI, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, affirms that Christ was already at work in the Old Testament, preparing His coming and guiding the history of salvation (Col 1:15–17).

### c) Christ, the Fulfillment of Mission

Jesus is fully aware of His mission: *“I must preach the good news of the Kingdom of God... for I was sent for this purpose”* (Lk 4:43). Jesus Christ, from the Incarnation to the Cross, reveals the face of the Father (Jn 14:9) and accomplishes the salvation promised since the fall of Adam; His mission begins among the people and continues toward eternity.

Christ brings to **fulfillment** the divine plan to restore communion with God and among human beings in a strong and definitive way (Eph 2:14–16). Therefore Paul adds: *“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Rom 5:1). In this way Christ represents the supreme act of God’s “missionary” love (Jn 15:13), which calls humanity to become a sign of His redemption to the ends of the earth through the Church founded by Him.

### d) The Church, Born for Mission

The first community of disciples is born with a clear missionary orientation: *“I will make you fishers of men”* (Mt 4:19). The apostles receive a universal mandate from Christ: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”* (Mt 28:19–20).

On the day of **Pentecost**, the Holy Spirit transforms the group of disciples into the missionary Church (Acts 2:1–11). This event marks the official beginning of the spread of the Gospel among the nations and represents the overcoming of the dispersion of Babel (Gen 11:1–9).

The Church is born as the universal sacrament of salvation (*Lumen Gentium* 1). She exists to transform all humanity into the People of God. Mission is not one activity among others, but her deepest identity (*Lumen Gentium* 17).

## 2. History of the Church

### a) Mission in the Apostolic Age and in the First Centuries

Already in the first decades of the Church, the need emerged to adapt the proclamation to different cultures. The **content of the**

**Gospel** is one, but the forms of proclamation vary. Paul thus becomes the model of the missionary: *“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some”* (1 Cor 9:22).

The first centuries witnessed the expansion of the faith through persecutions. Martyrdom became an eloquent form of evangelization, in fidelity to the words of Christ: *“You will be hated by all because of my name”* (Mt 10:22).

Tertullian affirms: *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians”* (*Apologeticum* 50,3), an expression that finds its echo in the Gospel: *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”* (Jn 12:24).

### b) The Edict of Milan and Missionary Monasticism

With the *Edict of Milan* (313), Christianity obtained freedom and a new phase began. A radical form of evangelical discipleship arose, often defined as *fuga mundi*, which was not an escape, but a search for authenticity.

Monasticism became a new missionary path. Figures such as Anthony the Abbot in Egypt bear witness that evangelical **radicalism** is already a form of proclamation.

Pope Gregory the Great (590–604) gave a strong impetus to the evangelization of the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon peoples, responding to Christ’s command: *“Go into all the world”* (Mk 16:15).

### c) The Middle Ages and the Modern Era

In the 13th century, Christianity spread to **Asia** thanks to Franciscan and Dominican

missionaries sent by Innocent IV with the bulls *Dei Patris Immensa* (1245) and *Viam agnoscere veritatis* (1248). Here too, mission unfolded amid difficulties and persecutions.

On the **American continent**, the Jesuits became protagonists of the missions, founding the reducciones, organized communities for evangelization, education, and the promotion of human development, in fidelity to the mandate to *“teach them to observe all that I have commanded you”* (Mt 28:20).

The Christian presence in **Africa** dates back to the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 8:26–40) and to the first centuries, with figures such as Victor I, Anthony the Abbot, and Saint Augustine. Missions in sub-Saharan Africa developed more systematically in the modern era. In 1864, Daniel Comboni formulated a plan to *“regenerate Africa with Africa,”* embodying the Pauline principle of ecclesial co-responsibility.

## 3. Conclusion

Mission has its origin in the **heart of God** (Jn 20:21), is manifested in the history of salvation, and continues in the life of the Church. Every age has generated new forms of evangelization, yet the essence remains the same: to proclaim Christ, the light of the nations (Lk 2:32), and to build a communion that embraces all peoples.

The **Theology of mission** reminds us that every Christian, by virtue of Baptism (Mt 28:19), is called to participate in this divine work, so that the Gospel may truly reach *“to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8).

**Missio Dei:** a foundational concept indicating that mission does not originate from the Church, but from God Himself. Mission is participation in God’s salvific work in history (Jn 20:21).

**Evangelization:** the explicit proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, which entails proclamation, witness, conversion, and transformation of life (Mk 16:15).

**Inculturation:** the process by which the Gospel is inserted into cultures, valuing them without distorting itself, and fostering an authentic encounter between faith and culture.

**Missio ad gentes:** a classical expression indicating the mission directed toward those who do not yet know Christ; it does not concern only geographically distant territories, but also secularized cultural contexts or those indifferent to faith.



# Mission *ad gentes*

## Augustinian Theology and Spirituality

Fr. Diones Rafael Paganotto, oad



To speak today of *missio ad gentes* does not mean merely to evoke a glorious past marked by great journeys, distant lands, and first proclamations. Rather, it means asking what it means to be Church in a world profoundly changed, marked by new questions, new forms of poverty, and new expressions of spiritual searching.

The **Decree *Ad Gentes* of the Second Vatican Council** continues to offer us a sure compass, not as a document to be archived, but as a living word that asks to be heard and reinterpreted. This article proposes a path in three stages:

1. a rereading of the essential core of the Decree;
2. a look at mission in the various continents where the Order of Discalced Augustinians is present;
3. a rereading of mission inspired by Saint Augustine, which helps us rediscover the deepest spiritual roots of missionary action.

## 1. *Ad Gentes*: A Church in Mission

The Decree *Ad Gentes* is dedicated to the missionary activity of the Church. It was approved with 2,394 votes in favor and only 5 against by the bishops gathered in the Council, and was promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, **1965**.

The title *Ad Gentes* means in Latin **to the nations** and derives from the opening words of the Decree itself, which begins from a simple and radical conviction: the Church does not exist for herself, but she is born from a sending, from a **movement** that has its origin in the very heart of God. The Father sends the Son, the Son gives the Spirit, and the Church is sent into the world to continue this dynamic of love.

Mission, therefore, is not one pastoral strategy among others, but the very mode of being of the Church. This changes our perspective: it is not a matter of “doing mission” when there is time and resources, but of living every ecclesial reality — parishes, reli-

gious communities, movements — with a missionary spirit.

The Decree insists that *missio ad gentes* has a precise content: the **proclamation of Jesus Christ**. Not an idea, not a moral system, but a living Person. Yet proclamation is not exhausted in words. When the Gospel takes root, it generates communities, new relationships, and concrete forms of Christian life. For this reason, *Ad Gentes* speaks forcefully of the birth and growth of local Churches, called in turn to become responsible and missionary.

One of the most timely aspects of the Decree is its constant attention to **inculturation**. The Gospel never arrives in neutral ground: it encounters languages, symbols, traditions, wounds, and hopes. To evangelize does not mean to erase cultures, but to enter into them with respect, discerning what can be enlightened and transformed by the light of Christ. It is a slow and patient process, requiring listening and humility.

## 2. Mission Today: Faces and Challenges across the Continents

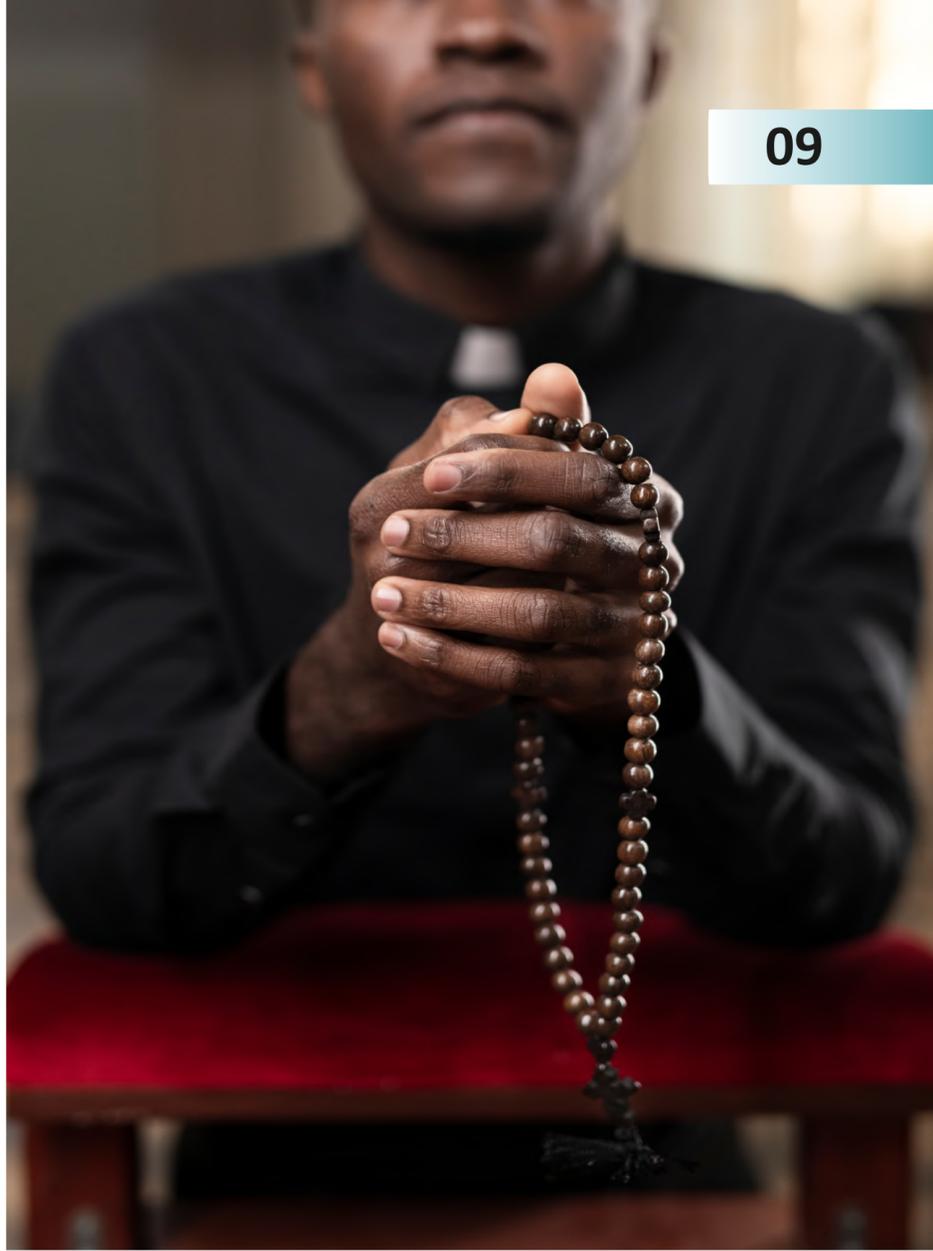
### a) Italy: Evangelizing in a “Weary” Land

Our Order was born and is present in various regions of Italy, where mission no longer takes place in a context of first evangelization, but within a reality marked by secularization, disengagement, and often by a faith reduced to cultural tradition. Here mission takes on the features of the new evangelization: beginning again from what is essential, returning to the Gospel, bearing witness more than explaining.

The challenge is not so much to “say more,” but to live in a credible way. Welcoming communities, religious men and women capable of listening, and a simple and fraternal style already become a form of proclamation.

### b) Brazil and Paraguay: Between Living Faith and Social Fragility

Since 1948 our Order has been present in Brazil and, more recently, also in Paraguay, where popular faith remains a great trea-



sure. Processions, devotions, and a strong sense of the sacred continue to speak to the hearts of people, especially the young and the humble.

At the same time, serious challenges are not lacking: social inequalities, migration, new forms of poverty, and the growth of alternative religious movements.

Here mission is called to hold together the proclamation of the Gospel and concrete attention to people’s lives, without separating faith and justice, spirituality and social commitment.

### c) Cameroon: A Young and Dynamic Church

Our mission in Cameroon presents the image of a young Church, rich in vocations and enthusiasm. Yet this vitality coexists with real difficulties: political tensions, ethnic conflicts, and economic fragility.

Mission thus passes through formation, dialogue, and the building of reconciled communities. Inculturation remains a key point: the Gospel must continue to encounter local cultures, purifying and valuing them, without falling into syncretism.

### d) Asia: Minority, Dialogue, and Silent Witness

Asia presents an extremely diverse reality. In India, engagement with the great religions is



a daily experience; in the Philippines, the Church lives a strong Catholic identity; in Indonesia and Vietnam, proclamation often takes place in conditions of minority and, at times, discretion.

In Asia, mission is not measured by large numbers. Yet it is precisely there that the Order is growing most through new members and communities, sustained by daily fidelity, silent witness, and service. It is often a mission that does not make noise, but works deeply and patiently beneath the surface.

### 3. Saint Augustine and Mission

Saint Augustine's reflection on the Church and on salvation retains a remarkable relevance for understanding *missio ad gentes* in our time.

In a context marked by cultural fragmentation, ecclesial tensions, and religious pluralism, Augustinian thought helps us rediscover the center of mission, avoiding both sterile activism and a disincarnate spirituality.

#### a) Unity and the *Christus Totus*

For Augustine, mission is never an individual action or merely the sum of initiatives. It is

always **ecclesial**, because it is born from the unity of the Body of Christ. A divided Church loses credibility, since the proclamation of the Gospel is authentic only when it is sustained by lived charity. Unity is not a secondary element, but the very criterion of truth.

This vision is expressed in the well-known **doctrine of the *Christus Totus***: Christ is the Head inseparable from His members. Mission does not aim only at the salvation of individual souls, but at the building up of this total Christ, in whom scattered humanity is progressively brought back to unity. As Augustine affirms: *"It is Christ who preaches Christ; the body preaches its Head and the Head protects His body"* (*Enarr. in Ps. 21, 2*).

From this perspective, the **universality** of the Church is not merely geographical, but profoundly theological: she is universal because she preserves the unity of faith in charity.

#### b) Speaking to the Heart of Man: Interior Life and Proclamation

Augustine knew profoundly the restlessness of the human heart, having experienced it personally. For this reason, he insists that the proclamation of the Gospel cannot stop

at an external or merely formal adherence. Authentic mission must reach the human person in the deepest place of existence, where the fundamental **decision** of life is made. The famous invitation to return within oneself is not an escape from the world, but the recognition that God speaks to the human being in the depths of the heart: *“Return to yourself; in the inner man dwells the truth”* (*De Vera Rel.* 39,72).

Mission, therefore, neither imposes nor conquers, but accompanies and persuades interiorly. It is a patient journey, respecting the rhythms of persons and recognizing that grace works in the secrecy of hearts even before it becomes visible outwardly.

### c) Inculturation: The Gold of the Egyptians

In the relationship between Gospel and cultures, Augustine offers a vision of great balance, still precious today for *missio ad gentes*.

Drawing from the biblical episode of the Exodus, the Bishop of Hippo affirms that **truth** is not the exclusive property of one people or one tradition. Even in pagan or secular cultures, elements of truth and beauty can be found which the Christian faith is called to recognize and purify.

Augustine expresses this clearly when he writes: *“If those who are called philosophers have said things that are true and in harmony with our faith... not only should they not be feared, but they should be taken from them as from unjust possessors and adapted to our use”* (*De Doctr. Chr.* II,40,60).

Inculturation, in this light, is not a compromise, but an **act of discernment**: mission does not destroy cultures, but redeems their “gold,” directing it to the service of the Gospel.

### d) The Two Cities: Mission as Pilgrimage

Augustinian eschatology finally offers a decisive key for understanding the ultimate meaning of mission. In *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine describes history as the place where two cities — the City of God and the earthly city — coexist and are interwoven until the final judgment: *“The two cities are mingled together in this age, until they are separated by the last judgment”* (*De Civ. Dei* I,35).

This vision preserves mission from the risk of triumphalism or from reducing the Gospel to a political project. The **Church lives within history**, yet she never fully identifies with



any human project. Therefore, mission does not consist in establishing the Kingdom of God as a completed reality on earth, but in calling men and women to orient their lives toward the future city.

In this sense, mission is profoundly marked by hope. The Church proclaims Christ knowing that she is on pilgrimage, accepting to be a sign of contradiction, yet also a sign of a promise that transcends history.

## 4. Conclusion

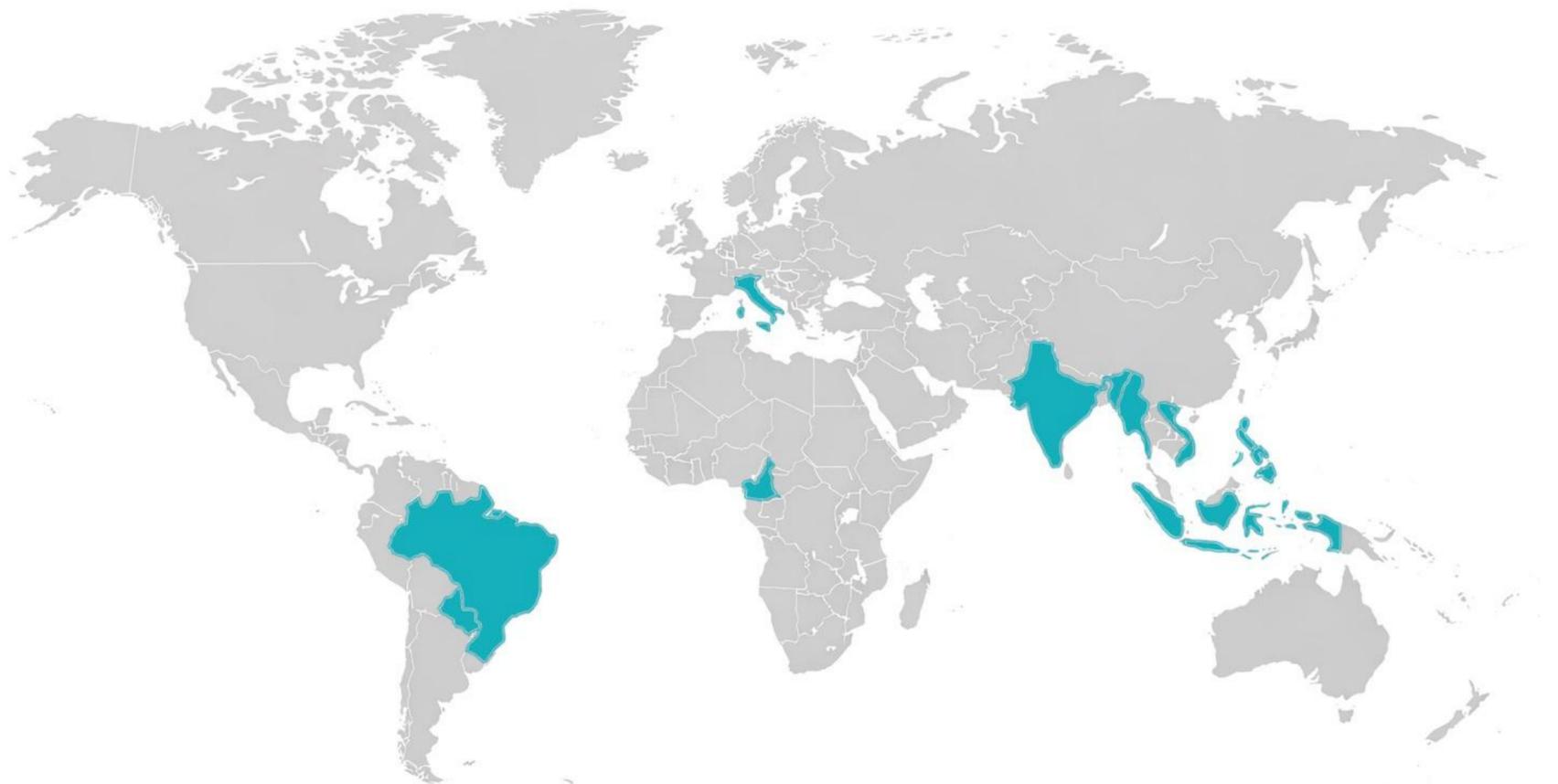
*Missio ad gentes* belongs to the very identity of the Christian people, called by God to set out continually, with vigilant hearts and willing spirits. The Second Vatican Council offered a profound reflection on this vocation, and more than sixty years later, the Decree retains its full relevance, still

capable of illuminating the challenges of our time, marked by globalization, cultural pluralism, and new spiritual questions.

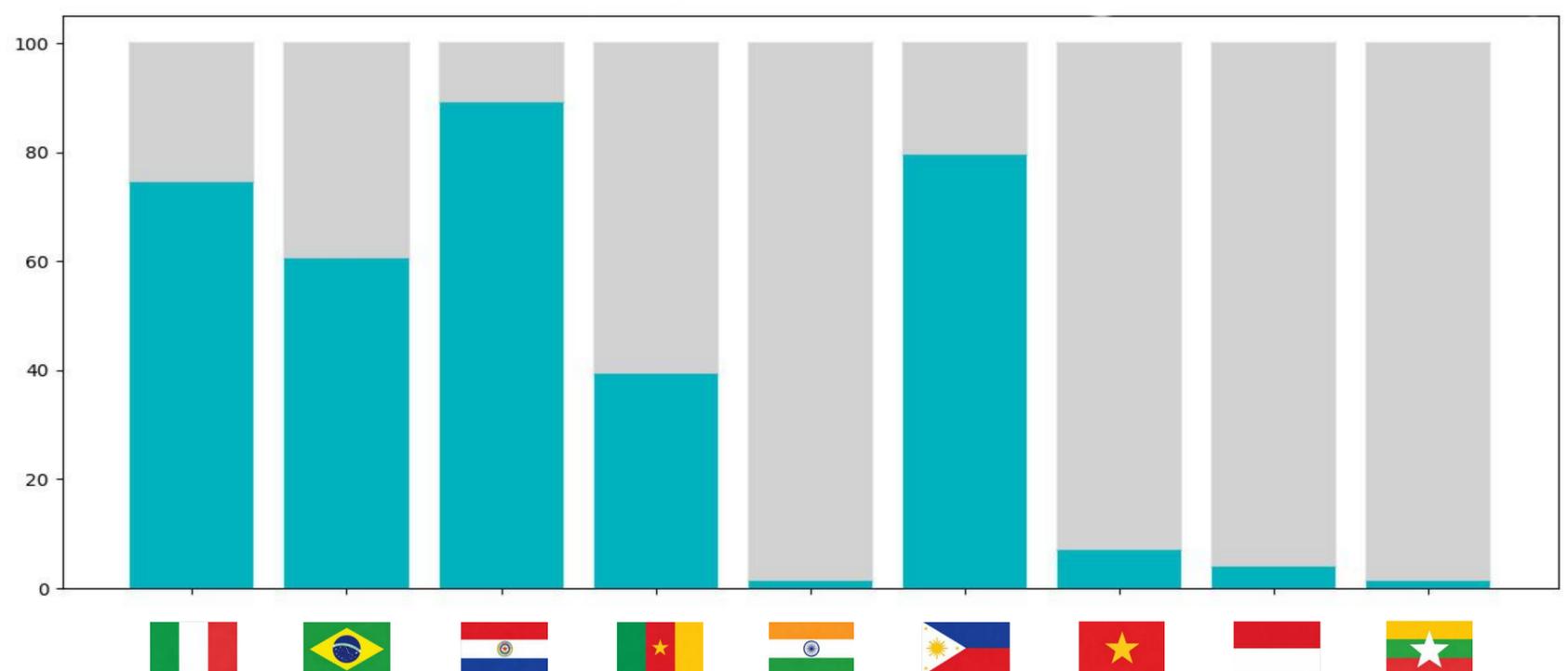
Read in the light of Augustinian wisdom, it continues to guide the path of our religious and lay faithful, helping them to encounter, discern, and value the diverse cultures of the continents where we are present, promoting authentic and respectful dialogue without being absorbed or confused by them.

With our gaze fixed on the ultimate goal, the heavenly Church, mission thus becomes not only proclamation, but coherent witness, fraternal communion, and humble service, a concrete sign of Christ's presence in history and a ferment of hope for every people.

### Countries where the Discalced Augustinians are present



### Percentage of Catholics in the total population





# Discalced Augustinians in Mission

## Outlines of History and Spirituality

Fr. Eugenio Cavallari, oad



### 1. A Look at the Past

Our Order matured its missionary vocation in **two different geographical and historical contexts**:

- from 1625 to 1698 in Central Europe, with various foundations of the Bohemian-German Province (Prague, Vienna, Tabor, Olomouc, Breslau), established to counter the Utraquist heresy of the Hussites and that of other reform movements, Lutheran and Calvinist;
- from the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 19th century in the Asian continent (Vietnam 1698–1757; China and the Philippines 1736–1811).

At the end of the 16th century, the Emperor of China, Kangxi, had granted freedom of worship to the Christian religion. For this reason, the Congregation of Propaganda Fide intensified its request to numerous religious Orders to send missionaries to the Far East.

The Discalced Augustinians were chosen to evangelize **Vietnam** and **China**. About one

hundred religious responded to the appeal of our Vicar General, the Neapolitan Fr. David of Saint Francis. On **March 1, 1697**, the first two religious departed from the Roman convent of Gesù e Maria: Fr. Alfonso Romano of the Mother of God and Fr. Giovanni Mancini of Saint Augustine and Saint Monica.

Subsequently, **missionary expeditions** followed one another for a total of ten: seven to Vietnam and three to China. In addition to the twenty-two Italian missionaries who evangelized the East, we must remember with deep gratitude and affection the six Vietnamese Discalced Augustinians, formed in our seminary of Kê-Van.

Among all, the most representative figures are undoubtedly: Fr. Giovanni Mancini (1664–1711), founder of the Vietnamese Mission, and Msgr. Ilario Costa (1696–1754), Apostolic Vicar of Eastern Tonkin; Fr. Sigismondo Meinardi (1713–1767), founder of the Chinese Mission, and Msgr. Damasceno Salustri (1727–1781), second Bishop of Beijing.

The mission in Vietnam came to an end in **1757** by decision of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide; the mission in China concluded in 1811 due to the persecution of Emperor Jiaqing.

On February 28, **1997**, in the church of Gesù e Maria, Cardinal Josef Tomko, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, inaugurated the missionary year of our Order on the occasion of the 3rd centenary of the departure for the East.

On November 29, **2017**, the 250th anniversary of the death of Fr. Sigismondo Meinardi was commemorated. He, like Msgr. Ilario Costa, who was born in Turin and originally from Pessinetto, was born in Turin to a family from Druento. There, first in the church and later in the Municipal Library, his figure as a great missionary was commemorated with the publication of a volume containing the first part of his epistolary, consisting of no fewer than two hundred seventy letters, highly valuable both for their Christian content and for the information they provide on Chinese culture.

In fact, since 1964 the Order has thoroughly studied and published almost the entire epistolary of our missionaries, through the initiative of Fr. Ignazio Barbagallo and Fr. Pietro Scalia, with the collaboration of the Professed of the convent of Gesù e Maria.

Finally, in the last century a **third phase** of the missionary expansion of our Order followed:

- May 29, 1948: after the General Chapter (1945), the first three Italian Discalced Augustinian missionaries, Fr. Luigi Raimondo, Fr. Antonio Scacchetti, and Fr. Francesco Spoto, departed from Genoa to found a new house in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- August 2, 1994: the Italian Fr. Luigi Kerschbamer opened the new mission in Cebu City, Philippines, later joined by two Brazilian confreres, Fr. Jandir Bergoza and Fr. Gilmar Morandim.
- January 20, 2008: the Congolese Fr. Gregorio Cibwabwa and the Brazilian Fr. Renato Jess began the mission in Bafut, Cameroon. Thus, the African continent becomes the point of conjunction between the beginning of Augustinian life in Tagaste, Algeria and the culmination of the entire missionary impetus of the Discalced Augustinians.

## 2. Looking Toward the Future

For more than thirty years now, the Discalced Augustinians have returned to the East: the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and India. For this reason, the time may soon come to return to China as well.

1948: The Prior General, Fr. Gabriele Raimondo, with the three missionaries leaving for Brazil: Fr. Antonio Scacchetti, Fr. Luigi Raimondo, and Fr. Francesco Spoto



We clearly perceive that the Lord and our first missionary confreres await us in order to continue their work. We nourish in our hearts a strong hope: **to bring Christ** to all people, in continuity with what one of our confreres in Vietnam once wrote: *“I shall enter Tonkin, I shall preach the true religion. I shall make my voice heard like a trumpet: outside the Church there is no salvation! One baptism, one soul, one fold, one Shepherd, one Dove. One holy Church: not Chinese, not Vietnamese, not Eastern, not Parisian, but Roman. Whoever is with Her shall see a heavenly Rome”* (Letter of Fr. Thomas of the Ascension).

This renewed missionary impetus flows directly from the quality and purity of our **authentic charism**, lived as both gift and responsibility: fidelity to the Word of Christ and to the working grace of the Holy Spirit, following the luminous example of Saint Augustine, master of profound interiority and tireless apostolic zeal.

Such fidelity is expressed in vigilant and intelligent attention to the signs of the times, in mature discernment of cultural and social transformations, and in the sincere desire to insert ourselves docilely into the directives of the Church’s Magisterium. It requires creative boldness in initiatives, generous perseverance in self-giving, the ability to work in fraternal communion, and patient humility in enduring difficulties and

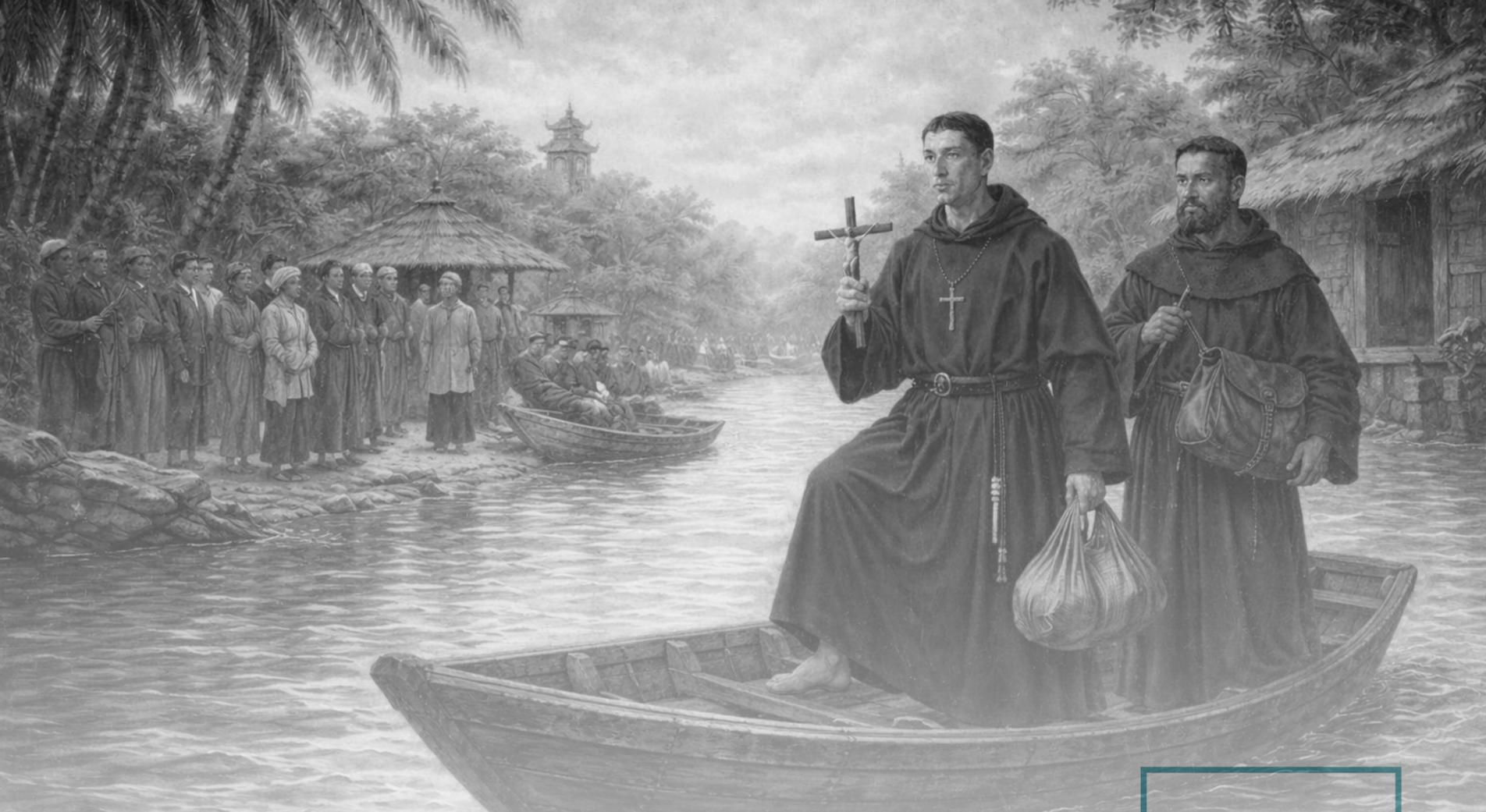
setbacks, always remaining firmly united to the mystery of the Cross, source of fruitfulness and hope for every authentic mission.

In this way, holiness nourishes mission, and mission nourishes the youthfulness of our Order. Fidelity to our original charism thus becomes a guarantee of continuity, which justifies our presence in the Church and in the world. The urgency that motivated our foundation must be the same urgency that calls for our presence in this particular historical moment.

**Saint John Paul II** magnificently summarized this missionary message in the Letter sent to our Order on the occasion of the celebration of the 4th centenary of its foundation (1992): *“Be men of communion. Do not withhold your collaboration so that dialogue with all may grow and expand, especially with those who are distant. Strive to promote greater mutual understanding, showing through your actions that God has brought you together so that you may work together. Love deeply your identity and your Order; undertake a profound cultural renewal and qualify your pastoral activity in an Augustinian way, harmonizing it with the demands of community life. Be firmly rooted in God and open to the needs of the modern world; in this way you will be able to sing the new song by bearing witness to the presence of God to the men and women of today.”*



1945: General Chapter, responsible for a new missionary thrust



# OAD Mission in Tonkin

A Synthesis of Historical, Biographical, and Cultural Elements in the Light of Archival Sources

Fr. Dennis Ruiz, oad

## 1. Historical Context and Archival Sources

The great mission of the Order of Discalced Augustinians in Tonkin during the **17th century** is situated within the broader framework of missionary initiatives promoted by the Holy See through the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, in response to the need for a stable and inculturated evangelization in Asian territories.

The archival sources of the Order (1) constitute a precious testimony for reconstructing this missionary experience, through the *Relationes missionum*, letters of the missionaries, provincial registers, and conventual necrologies.

According to the *Relationes* sent to Propaganda Fide and preserved in the archives of the Order, the mission in Tonkin developed within a politically and religiously unstable context, marked by alternating periods of tolerance and repression toward Christians (2).

## 2. Inculturation in a Confucian Context

**Tonkin**, deeply influenced by Confucianism and by local religious traditions, required a prudent and respectful pastoral approach.

The sources show that the Discalced Augustinians adopted a **missionary methodology** based on learning the language, forming local communities, and accompanying indigenous catechists, who were considered essential for the survival of the faith during times of persecution (3).

From a historical perspective, the documentation highlights that the Augustinian missionaries did not intend to impose Western models, but rather to foster an **inculturation of the Gospel**.

The letters preserved in the archives of the Order and in the collections of Propaganda Fide attest to a constant discernment regarding sensitive cultural practices, particularly the cult of ancestors, seeking to distinguish between elements compatible with



the Christian faith and those that required evangelical purification (4).

### 3. Integral Pastoral Ministry

The archival sources also make it possible to outline with greater precision the concrete pastoral works carried out by the Discalced Augustinians in direct contact with the people of Tonkin.

The missionary activity was not limited to preaching or to the administration of the sacraments, but took the form of an integral pastoral ministry, capable of accompanying the **daily life** of Christian communities in a context that was often hostile.

The *Relationes missionum* attest to a constant commitment to systematic catechesis, organized in small family or village groups, adapted to the rhythms of local life and based on oral transmission.

Particular attention was given to preparation for Baptism, Matrimony, and Reconciliation, with prolonged accompaniment of catechumens, often continued even after the reception of the sacraments (5).

A central area of pastoral activity was the formation of **local catechists**, regarded as true collaborators in the mission. They not

only taught Christian doctrine, but also presided over community prayer, transmitted moral instruction, and kept the faith alive during the forced absences of the missionaries. The sources show that the missionaries invested time and resources in their doctrinal and spiritual preparation (6).

### 4. Charity, Persecutions, and Witness

Alongside catechesis, there also emerges a pastoral attention to **situations of suffering**: assistance to the sick, accompaniment of the dying, and support for families affected by persecutions or confiscations. In this sense, the mission assumed a profoundly charitable character, embodying the Augustinian charism of *caritas in veritate*.

On the biographical level, the sources allow us to identify figures of missionaries marked by deep spiritual life, apostolic zeal, and a spirit of sacrifice. Among these stands out **Msgr. Ilario Costa**, whose activity is attested in the official correspondence of the Order.



Portrait of Msgr. Ilario Costa,  
preserved in the sacristy of the Parish of Pessinetto (Italy), his birthplace

## 5. Biographical Profile of Msgr. Ilario Costa, Missionary and Pastor

Msgr. Ilario Costa was one of the most significant figures of the Discalced Augustinian mission in Tonkin during the 17th century.

His presence is documented in the missionary *Relationes* and in the letters preserved in the General Archive of the Order and in the collections of Propaganda Fide, where he appears as a missionary of pastoral experience and solid theological formation.

From the sources there emerges the profile of a pastor deeply attentive to the formation of local Christian communities. Msgr. Costa worked in a context marked by frequent persecutions, demonstrating leadership, prudence, and spiritual fortitude.

His action focused particularly on catechesis, on the preparation of indigenous cate-

chists, and on strengthening the faith of neophytes, so that the communities might endure even during prolonged absences of the missionaries.

Msgr. Ilario Costa exercised his ministry as an itinerant pastor, regularly visiting the communities scattered throughout the territory, often in dangerous conditions. The sources describe a particular attention to pastoral visitation, understood not merely as disciplinary supervision, but as a moment of listening, reconciliation, and strengthening of ecclesial communion (7).

A distinctive trait of his pastoral ministry was his care for sacramental life in contexts of clandestinity. Msgr. Costa strove to ensure the celebration of the Eucharist and sacramental reconciliation even during persecutions, adapting times and methods to local circumstances. His action contributed decisively to keeping alive the Christian identity of the communities, preventing the faith from being reduced to a purely private practice.

On the formative level, he decisively promoted the responsibility of the laity, encouraging the development of a local Church capable of sustaining itself even without the constant presence of missionaries. The sources emphasize that Msgr. Costa regarded catechists and community leaders not as mere executors, but as true ecclesial subjects, anticipating a vision of the Church that would later find fuller expression.

From a spiritual perspective, his pastoral ministry was clearly inspired by the thought of Saint Augustine: the centrality of interiority, the unity of the community, and the primacy of charity. The trial of persecutions was interpreted by Msgr. Costa as an occasion for purification and maturation of faith, rather than as a sign of defeat.

The letters attributed to Msgr. Ilario Costa testify to a vision of mission deeply rooted in the Augustinian charism: the centrality of ecclesial communion, the primacy of pastoral charity, and profound trust in the action of grace. He showed particular sensitivity toward local culture, avoiding attitudes of imposition and instead fostering respectful dialogue, while maintaining clarity in Christian proclamation (8).

His figure represents a model of missionary who was able to unite fidelity to the Church, love for the people entrusted to his care, and the capacity for discernment in complex situations. For this reason, Msgr. Ilario Costa occupies a prominent place in the historical memory of the Augustinian mission in Asia.

## 6. Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the mission of the Discalced Augustinians in Tonkin during the 17th century, as it emerges from the archival sources of the Order, appears as an experience of evangelization marked by perseverance, cultural dialogue, and coherent witness to the Gospel.

It constitutes a significant chapter not only in the history of the Order, but also in the broader history of the Church in Asia, offering even today valuable criteria for reflection on the ecclesial mission in the contemporary world.

1 STATE ARCHIVE, Rome, Discalced Augustinians.

2 Cf. ARCHIVE OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE PROPAGATION OF THE FAITH, Rome, *Missiones Orientales, Tonchinensis, Relatio annua*, 17th century.

3 Cf. STATE ARCHIVE, Rome, Discalced Augustinians, *Epistolae Missionariorum ad Superiores, Tonkin*, files 3–5.

4 cfr. SA, Rome, DA, *Missiones Asiaticæ, Quaestiones de ritibus, Tonchinum*.

5 cfr. SA, Rome, DA, *Missiones Orientales, Tonchinum, Relatio annua, saec. XVII*.

6 cfr. SA, Rome, DA, *Epistolae Missionariorum ad Superiores, Tonchinum, fasc. 3–6*.

7 cfr. SA, Rome, DA, *Epistolae Ill.mi Missionarii Hilarionis Costa, Tonchinum, saec. XVII*.

8 cfr. SA, Rome, DA, *Epistolae Ill.mi Missionarii Hilarionis Costa, Tonchinum, sec. XVII*



# OAD Mission Today

## Presence and Challenges in Southeast Asia

Fr. Harold Toledano, oad

Southeast Asia is a region marked by extraordinary cultural and religious diversity, offering at the same time complex challenges and valuable pastoral opportunities.

Today our Order in Southeast Asia represents a **dynamic and rapidly growing reality**, with a significant presence in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar. The confreres engage with contexts that differ greatly from one another:

- Philippines: the country with the largest Catholic community in Southeast Asia and, worldwide, second only to Brazil and Mexico, with approximately 85 million Catholics.
- Indonesia: about 10 million Catholics, concentrated mainly on the islands of Flores and Java, within a population that is predominantly Muslim.
- Vietnam: approximately 7–10% of the population professes the Catholic faith.
- Myanmar: about 700,000 Catholics, representing 1.3% of the population.

## 1. Challenges of Mission in Asia

Like many other Congregations more recently established in the region, our Order finds itself facing a complex and constantly changing context.

One of the primary challenges concerns cultural adaptation, that is, the need **to inculturate** the Catholic faith within diverse local realities, while at the same time safeguarding the integrity of the Christian message.

In societies characterized by marked religious pluralism, the witness of faith must be combined with **respectful and constructive dialogue**, capable of fostering peaceful coexistence with Islam, Buddhism, and other religious traditions.

To this is added the rapid growth of Pentecostalism and of Evangelical communities, which challenges the Church to renew her language and pastoral methods. The shortage of priests and religious also

requires new and farsighted strategies to ensure a stable ecclesial presence within communities, while the formation of the faithful, of presbyters, and of the laity assumes a central role in responding adequately to the challenges posed by modernity and increasing secularization.

In certain contexts, there are also difficulties related to **discrimination and restrictions** against Christians, which make it even more urgent to strengthen Catholic identity and to care for ecclesial communion. At the same time, commitment to the evangelization of non-Catholic communities and the promotion of interreligious dialogue emerge as indispensable dimensions of mission.

Finally, in a region marked by profound economic and social **inequalities**, the promotion of social justice and human rights represents a priority field of evangelical witness. Such challenges demand a courageous and creative response from the Church and from religious Institutes, called to continual renewal in order to remain faithful to their missionary vocation.

## 2. Missionary Activity

Within the context of the local Catholic mission, the Order offers a significant contribution through various activities.

**Education and healthcare:** the foundation and administration of a school and care centers contribute to the human and social

development of communities. In particular, the educational sector represents one of the principal areas of commitment, with high-quality institutions that form many young people. In the healthcare field as well, Catholic facilities often provide help to those most in need.

**Promotion of human rights:** the Order is engaged in defending the dignity and freedom of the human person through service to the poor, the marginalized, and the vulnerable, offering material support and working to improve the living conditions of local communities.

**Interreligious dialogue:** constructive dialogue among different religious traditions is promoted, contributing to peace and harmonious coexistence.

**Promotion of local cultures:** the Order supports the expression and preservation of indigenous cultures, helping people to find meaning and direction in life.

**Ecclesial growth:** the presence of Catholic immigrants further contributes to the development of the Church in various contexts of the region.

Despite difficulties related to poverty, inequalities, and at times persecution, the Order operates in close synergy with the local Church, sharing her pastoral and missionary priorities.



Mission in Indonesia



### Philippines

The seat of the our Asian Province is located in Cebu City, Philippines, under the patronage of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino.

It extends its jurisdiction to all the houses of the Order present in Asia, particularly in Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and India, promoting an organic coordination of religious life and apostolic activity throughout the continent.

The Province has experienced significant growth not only at the local level, but also internationally, strengthening communion among the various presences and fostering new missionary initiatives. In the Philippines, new Communities have been erected to serve the People of God in the Dioceses of Daet, Pampanga, Masbate, and soon in Pagadian, alongside the educational and formative commitment carried out at Tabor Hill College and at the Santa Monica Institute of Theology (SMIT).

Among the principal missionary activities are the reception of religious from other countries, a concrete sign of the fraternity and universality of the Order; collaboration in parishes and university chaplaincies; and shared work with the laity in multiple initiatives of Christian formation, spiritual accompaniment, and human promotion.



### Indonesia

The Order is present in Indonesia with a community in Bandung, situated within a predominantly Muslim context. In this plural environment, the presence of the religious is configured as a discreet yet significant sign of

evangelical witness and fraternity. Among the principal missionary activities are the welcome offered to Christians, providing the community with a point of reference for spiritual and sacramental life; the initiation of formation paths and accompaniment in the faith; concrete collaboration with the poorest, according to the basic needs of the territory; and the constant commitment to maintaining respectful and constructive interreligious dialogue with the local population and its culture.



I am **Fr. Yanuarius Muni**. My personal call to enter into direct contact with nature matured in a particular way after my Priestly Ordination on May 31, 2022, in the Cathedral of Bandung, through the laying on of hands by Bishop Antonius Subianto. I have increasingly come to understand that a priest is not only a minister of the sacraments, but is also called to undertake concrete and fruitful actions for the Order and for the Church.

This conviction is closely linked to my academic path during the Master's Degree in Theology at Parahyangan Catholic University, where I wrote my thesis entitled *"Building Awareness of the Earth as Sacred Space."* For me, the earth is not merely matter; it bears within itself a spark of the Divine, because it is created by God's love. To recognize its sacredness means to develop an attitude of respect, gratitude, and responsibility. I consider this an integral part of my mission as a religious and as a priest.

In our Community of Cisarua, on a plot of approximately 1.3 hectares, we cultivate organic vegetables such as lettuce, broccoli, tomatoes, eggplants, green beans, and cabbage. Coming from a family of farmers, and having worked the land during my religious formation, I experience this activity as a natural continuation of my vocation. The friars participate weekly in sowing, caring for, and harvesting the crops, using organic fertilizers produced also with the help of animals kept on the property.

The vegetables are brought to the parishes of Sunter in Jakarta, Kemuning, and Buah Batu in Bandung, where they are offered with the formula "take what you need and make a voluntary donation," intended to support the formation of the religious of the Order. In this simple service I recognize a concrete way of living our charism: *"To serve the Most High in spirit of humility."* It is a small gesture, yet it expresses the desire to love the earth and to serve humanity as part of God's design.

Another significant moment was the opening, at the beginning of 2026, of the new seat of formation for postulants in Bandung, connected with the religious Community and called "Thagaste". The name recalls the original experience of Saint Augustine, who understood that the encounter with God is realized not only in the personal dimension, but also in fraternity lived through mutual self-giving. For us, this means building a truly fraternal community, effective in service and authentically missionary, capable of proclaiming the Gospel with humility and joy.





## Vietnam

The Vietnamese Church is distinguished by its pastoral dynamism, particularly in the evangelization of youth and in attention to the most vulnerable communities. It also promotes interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence with the various religious traditions present in the country.

Within this context, the Order carries out its mission through collaboration in parishes, offering pastoral service also to English-speaking faithful, who are increasingly present in urban areas.

There is a concrete commitment to the construction of churches and centers of spirituality, conceived as places of prayer, formation, and accompaniment. Particular attention is given to the formation of religious, so that they may respond with competence and spiritual depth to emerging pastoral needs.

The challenges in Vietnam remain numerous: the growing secularization of society and governmental restrictions on religious freedom require creativity and prudence. Yet precisely amid such difficulties, opportunities arise for vocational growth, interreligious dialogue, and renewed commitment to peace, mutual understanding, and service to those in need.



I am **Fr. Anthony Duong Xuan Tien**, and I wish to begin my testimony by recalling with gratitude the long and significant missionary presence of the Order of Discalced Augustinians in Vietnam.

The Order has left a profound mark on the history of the Vietnamese Church. For more than 120 years, from 1696 to 1821, the friars proclaimed the Gospel and contributed to

the formation of the faith of the People of God, building a spiritual legacy that still bears fruit today.

After a long period of absence due to historical circumstances, the Order officially returned to Vietnam in 2008, thanks to the commitment of the Province of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino of the Philippines. With this return, the spirit and charism of the Discalced Augustinians were renewed: fraternal communion, humble service, and concrete love for the local Church.

Since the reestablishment, the presence of the Order has grown steadily. Today we operate through three communities located in the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City, in the Diocese of Da Nang, and in the Diocese of Xuan Loc. Alongside pastoral ministry, the formation of vocations represents one of the most consoling signs of this journey.

At present, the Order counts 10 Vietnamese priests, 3 deacons, more than 30 professed religious who continue their studies in Italy and in the Philippines, and about 30 semi-

narians in formation at Catholic institutes in Vietnam. This growth, both numerical and spiritual, manifests the vitality of the Discalced Augustinian charism within the Vietnamese Church.

Looking at the fruits already gathered and at the rapid development of infrastructures, vocations, and pastoral initiatives, I am deeply convinced that the Holy Spirit is acting powerfully in our mission. I believe that God does not forget the sacrifices and commitment of the missionaries who wrote the first pages of our history in Vietnam, and that He continues today to bless the path of the Order in this land.

In my heart I carry the hope that, with time and with the necessary support, a new Province may arise in Vietnam, as a sign of

the maturity and stability of the charism. I also hope for ever greater attention and accompaniment from the Prior General and the Superiors, so that the Discalced Augustinian spirit may fully flourish and the Order may continue the work begun by Mons. Ilario Costa and by the first missionaries, bringing to completion the still open pages of our missionary history. May the Holy Spirit guide and sustain us on this path of fidelity and service.

Among the missionary activities, a significant place is held by ministry to the sick, lived with fraternal presence and spiritual accompaniment, the formation of religious, and active collaboration with the local Church in her various needs, with the help of many benefactors and laics.





# OAD Mission Today

## Presence and Challenges in Cameroon

Fr. Serge Kwanda, oad

### 1. Historical Notes

The presence of the Discalced Augustinians in Cameroon is relatively recent, yet deeply significant.

**2008:** on January 29, the first two confreres, Fr. Gregorio Cibwabwa and Fr. Renato Jess, arrived in Cameroon to initiate the project of a House of Formation. This moment marked the official beginning of the missionary presence of our Order in the Anglophone region, particularly in Mambu-Bafut, in the Northwest Region.

The choice of this area proved providential: the local Church was alive and growing, yet in need of structured formation, pastoral organization, and the stable religious presence of a community open to mission.

**2010:** several young men from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and from Cameroon joined the mission to begin their formative journey as aspirants in our Order.

The House of Formation in Mumbi gradually became a point of reference for vocations

from the African continent. Over the years, various aspirants began their formation with the collaboration of the religious communities of Brazil and Italy.

**2019:** Fr. Serge Kwanda became the first Discalced Augustinian religious from the mission in Cameroon to receive priestly ordination. In this way, the Augustinian charism took root in Cameroonian soil, offering a spirituality centered on common life.

### 2. Challenges of Mission

#### a) Security and Armed Conflict

The **Anglophone crisis**, a separatist conflict that has lasted for nearly a decade, represents the most serious challenge for the mission of the Church in the Anglophone region of Cameroon. The crisis has caused internal displacement, destruction of villages, closure of schools, kidnappings, and a constant climate of insecurity.

Pastoral and missionary activities are often carried out under conditions of uncertainty. Reaching certain mission stations may



2010: Visit of the Prior Provincial

require three or four hours of walking through areas that are difficult to access. In this context, the words of Christ resound with particular force: *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God”* (Mt 5:9).

The presence of the Church thus becomes not only sacramental, but also prophetic, called to be an instrument of reconciliation. Like the Good Shepherd who does not abandon the flock (Jn 10:11), priests and religious continue to visit communities, celebrate the Eucharist, and offer **spiritual consolation** even amid instability.

#### b) Natural Disasters and Conflicts over Resources

Seasonal floods frequently destroy crops and infrastructure, aggravating poverty and food insecurity. **Economic fragility** fuels tensions over land and resources. In these circumstances, the Church lives out the evangelical call to solidarity: *“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink”* (Mt 25:35).

Our missionary presence includes not only spiritual assistance, but also concrete charity and accompaniment of people in their **daily difficulties**, sharing joys, hopes, fears, and challenges with those whom God has entrusted to our spiritual care.

#### c) Pastoral and Socio-Political Issues

The division between Anglophone and Francophone communities has generated mistrust and tensions. The Church is called to be a bridge of dialogue, reflecting Christ’s prayer *“that they may all be one”* (Jn 17:21).

Among the pastoral difficulties is also the shortage of adequately formed catechists and the limited **theological preparation** in more remote areas. Evangelization requires patience, listening, and gradual accompaniment. As Paul reminds us, *“We preach Christ crucified”* (1 Cor 1:23), even when the message passes through suffering and misunderstanding.

#### d) Education and Health

In conflict areas, many schools remained closed for years. Even after reopening, **qualified personnel** are still insufficient. The interruption of education has made an entire generation more vulnerable. The Church seeks to respond through parish initiatives, youth programs, and moral formation.

Access to healthcare is also limited in the more remote villages. Priests and religious often become mediators of assistance and hope in communities where institutional support is minimal.

### 3. Pastoral Activities and Future Perspectives

The mission of the Discalced Augustinians in the Anglophone region is rooted in **availability to the People of God**.

Mass is celebrated daily in the mother church of Saint Joseph Parish and, on other days, in our House of Formation and in several women's religious communities, as well as in a facility for persons with disabilities.

On Sundays, the **priests** who compose our religious Community travel to the mission stations for the celebration of the Eucharist, the administration of the sacraments, as well as to preside over funerals and conduct catechesis.

Despite the difficulties, the mission continues to bear fruit. A significant number of priests, formed in our House of Formation in Bafut, are at the service of the Order and of the Church in Cameroon and in Italy.

Looking to the future, the Church in Cameroon remains committed to the building of peace and reconciliation between Anglophone and Francophone communities. The construction of new churches and mission stations continues, together with the strengthening of vocations and the promotion of Augustinian spirituality.

In a region marked by challenges yet **rich in faith**, our mission proposes itself as a concrete sign of hope, founded on Christ's promise: *"I am with you always, until the end of the age"* (Mt 28:20).

The Discalced Augustinian charism, rooted in the spirituality of Saint Augustine and lived in simplicity, evangelical poverty, and fraternal communion, makes us joyful to serve the Most High in a spirit of humility, uniting witness, prayer, and pastoral action.



2026: Fr. Serge Kwanda with parishioners



# Discalced Augustinians in Rome

Examples of Visual Representation and (Self-)representation throughout Past Centuries

Renske de Vries



Amidst the busy Via del Corso in Rome, the church of Gesù e Maria firmly stands as a house for quiet prayer, shared celebration and community. While the property was bought by the Order of Discalced Augustinians in 1615 to construct a convent, church and school, it still serves as a residence and formation house for the religious community today. This remaining presence of the Discalced Augustinian friars in Rome, ever since the early seventeenth century, is something that can also be traced back in works of art.

As I was writing my bachelor's thesis (*Works of art in the sacristy, choir and gallery of Gesù e Maria: a new study of iconography, attribution and dating*) in the field of art history last year, I stumbled upon several artworks that illustrate this.

Therefore, in this short article, I would like to offer the reader a surface-level introduction to these works, which are all different in terms of style, medium and dating, yet are unified by what is referred to as **(self-)representation**, or in other words: a conscious

use of imagery to illustrate the unique identity of the Order and its friars.

## 1. A small drawing on parchment, kept in Florence

The first artwork worth showing is a precious watercolor drawing (**fig. 1**) made on parchment, likely done by a monk in Florence in the first half of the 17th century, where the work is still kept today. With almost documentary precision, the artist has drawn up what a **Discalced Augustinian friar**, with his hands peacefully clasped in prayer, would generally have worn at that time: a black habit, modest sandals, a leather belt and a knee-length cape with a pointed hood. Evidently, little of this has changed over time.

But, all the more curious is that this small watercolor is part of a larger series of drawings showing monks of various orders in their distinct habits, assumingly to make the friars roaming around identifiable. Therefore, the drawing can be interpreted

further distinguishing the different parts that make up the unique Discalced Augustinian habit.

## 2. A once-exhibited watercolor by Achille Pinelli

A softer watercolor drawing by Achille Pinelli (**fig. 2**) then offers an impression of three Discalced Augustinians, seen in front view, side view and back view, **conversing before the façade of Gesù e Maria on the Via del Corso**, somewhere in the early nineteenth century. While their conversation reminds of the confraternity found at Gesù e Maria, the depiction of a well-dressed gentleman giving alms to another monk illustrates that centuries ago, the Via del Corso already had a bustling, diverse character.

What is important to note here, is, again, the purpose of this drawing: as photography was not yet invented, Pinelli made a series of roughly two hundred watercolors to catalogue the many buildings in Rome at that time. He then combined these with lively, staged, day-to-day scenes, creating compositions that catch the attention. As an example of the ever-evolving cityscape of Rome, this particular watercolor was chosen to be exhibited among seventy drawings of



Fig. 1 Augustinianus Discalceatus.

as means to recognize the Discalced Augustinians in the street, based on their habit, which – at least at that time – also included a particularly shorter cape. It also explains why the artist has used significantly lighter colors to stress the different materiality of the sandals and belt, as this helps



Fig. 2

Pinelli's series in the 2007 exhibition 'Achille Pinelli's Rome' at the Museo di Roma, offering a glimpse back in time. Yet while the Via del Corso increasingly commercializes, the

presence of the friars of Gesù e Maria remains an unchanged sight in the street.



Fig. 3

### 3. The Augustinian fresco cycle in the gallery of Gesù e Maria

A remarkable early case of (self)-representation can be found in Gesù e Maria's gallery, where a cycle of seven 17th century frescos is undergoing a – truly saddening – state of deterioration. In my thesis, I have done significant research into these refined frescos, worthy of appreciation and understanding.

But what is striking is that these frescos are not only unified thematically, as they all focus on **episodes of the life of Saint Augustine**, but also visually. Following the third lunette with 'The Dressing of St. Augustine', the figure of St. Augustine is exclusively dressed in the Discalced Augustinian habit, with a black, pointed hood, and remains accompanied by brothers wearing the very same throughout the other scenes (**fig. 3**). Certainly, this cycle of paintings was commissioned by the friars of Gesù e Maria not long after the space of the gallery finished construction in 1632.

As it is a space reserved for their passage alone, it only makes sense that these artworks were requested to be a visual representation of the Discalced Augustinian

friars, their fraternity, and their close connection to Saint Augustine, spiritual father of the Order.

### 4. The ceiling painting of the first missionaries in Tonkin, Vietnam, in the choir of Gesù e Maria

Another artwork in the church of Gesù e Maria that was commissioned by the friars themselves, is the ceiling painting in the vault of the choir. The work is assumed to have been made around 1817, at the time that the choir was renovated and embellished.

This painting, too, is located in a secluded space, where only the friars generally would see it. Interestingly enough, it actually consists of two depictions: one of Saint Augustine washing Christ's feet, and the other depicting **the first Discalced Augustinian missionaries in the landscape of Tonkin, Vietnam** (detail, **fig. 4**), who departed from Rome on March 1, 1697, to proclaim the Word of God in foreign lands.

By choosing a representation of the friars as missionaries abroad, the prominent ceiling painting not only reminds the brothers of Gesù e Maria of their own mission, but also



Fig. 4

serves as a visual documentation of an important event for the mission in Southeast Asia, worth continuously commemorating among the Discalced Augustinians.

## 5. An extraordinary oil painting by François Marius Granet, now on display at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York

Lastly, in 1808, the French artist François Marius Granet painted an everyday-glance into the **gallery of Gesù e Maria (fig. 5)**.

His work, inspired by 'genre' painting, shows a handful of friars in the foreground and background, dressed in the Discalced Augustinian habit with a cape, entering the nave of the church from the gallery. One monk holds his rosary, the other rings the bell, and all appear deep in their thoughts.

With great skill, Granet painted the subtle lights and shadows, cast through the windows onto the groin vault. As his atelier was not far from the church, Granet must have seen the gallery with his own eyes and felt inspired to paint it. Evidently, the space has become much emptier at present, but through my research, I was able to reconstruct that the gallery once indeed looked like this, before doorways were walled up,

frescos started to deteriorate, paintings of members of the Order were moved elsewhere and adjacent buildings were constructed.

But truly noteworthy – at least to the art historian – is that this painting was first shown at the Paris Salon of 1808 and is now on view at The Metropolitan Museum in New York, which means that a beautifully humble, sober visual representation of the Discalced Augustinians in their day-to-day activities has made its way into one of the world's largest and most prestigious art museums as of today, making the Order's identity visible to a contemporary, international audience.



Fig. 5

Together, the above-shown artworks give an impression of how the Discalced Augustinians in Rome have been represented by various artists across time, style and medium for different purposes, ever since the foundation of the Order.

Some works are rather documentary, whereas others serve as (self-)representation or are simply meant to capture an

'everyday' setting in an artistic way.

But while the cityscape of Rome continuously changes, and even spaces within the church undergo alterations over time, it is noticeably the distinct habit of the friars that remains a clear and enduring visual marker in these works of art, which is as unchanging as the presence of the Order in the **church of Gesù e Maria in Via del Corso (fig. 6)**.



Fig. 6

Fig. 1: Unknown artist, Discalced Augustinian, first half of the seventeenth century (?), watercolor on parchment, 17 x 11 cm, Diocesan Deposit of Santo Stefano al Ponte, Florence.

Fig. 2: Achille Pinelli, Gesù e Maria, ca. 1826 – 1835, watercolor, 47 x 60,6 cm, Museo di Roma, Rome.

Fig. 3: Clarified detail of: unknown artist, St. Augustine meditating upon the Trinity along the seashore, as the child tries to empty the sea with a shell, ca. 1632 – 1699, fresco, gallery of Gesù e Maria, Rome.

Fig. 4: Detail of: unknown artist, St. Augustine washes the feet of Christ, in a landscape depicting the first Discalced Augustinian missionaries in Tonkin, Vietnam, ca. 1817, painted in secco on plaster, choir of Gesù e Maria, Rome.

Fig. 5: François Marius Granet, Monks in the cloister of the church of Gesù e Maria, Rome, 1808, oil on canvas, 49,5 x 39,1 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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**Renske de Vries** completed her Bachelor of Arts cum laude in 2025 at Radboud University Nijmegen and dedicated her thesis to the works of art located in the sacristy, choir and gallery of Gesù e Maria in Rome. For her thesis, she was admitted to do library research at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence and had the privilege to stay at the church for on-site research, discussion and photographing. She is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Art History, and is working on an introductory catalogue of the artworks found throughout Gesù e Maria, now including those in the nave through new research.



# Some Pictures

## Sharing a Bit of Our Life

### Toledo – Brazil

#### January 5–9, 44th Annual Meeting of the Friars

The traditional gathering marked the beginning of the year for the Province of Santa Rita de Cássia in an atmosphere of prayer, listening, and fraternity. The opening and welcoming celebration was presided over by the Prior General, Fr. Nei Márcio Simon.

Each day began with the celebration of the Holy Mass, followed by formation sessions inspired by the Conferences of the Convention on the Sources of Our Spirituality held in Rome last October. Several confreres revisited the reflections and shared their testimonies: Fr. Getulio Freire Pereira (*Ritual*),

Fr. Dorian Ceteroni (*Spirituality*), Fr. José Valnir da Silva (*Constitutions and Directory*), Fr. Marcelo Leandro (*Other Sources*), Fr. Moacir Chiodi (the three meetings with the Pope), and Fr. Márcio da Silva (the vow of humility and the Venerable Fr. Giovanni Nicolucci). Fr. Diones Rafael Paganotto, Secretary General, also spoke on the *Vademecum*, and the Prior General offered the concluding remarks.

The meeting was further enriched by moments of dialogue, fraternity, and sports, strengthening the bonds among the confreres and reinforcing the common journey of the Province.



**January 7, Provincial Meeting**

After the celebration of the Mass, most of the members of the Province of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino gathered for a

moment of communion around the table, in a spirit of priestly and religious fraternity. The meeting also served to organize part of the provincial activities and to initiate the transfers of some religious.



Cebu City – Philippines

**January 7, New Religious Community**

In accordance with the provisions of the most recent Provincial Chapter, the Prior Provincial, Fr. Luigi Kerschbamer, following the canonical erection of the new Community of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino in Porac, Pampanga, in the Archdiocese of San Fernando, received the Profession of Faith

of the Prior and officially installed Fr. Crisologo Suan, together with the members of the community, Fr. Ryan Ragaza and Fr. James Dobles. The establishment of the new community represents a significant milestone in the life and mission of the Province of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, renewing its commitment to the service of the People of God and to the promotion of religious and priestly vocations.



## Cebu City – Philippines

### January 7–8, Symposium on the Sources of Our Spirituality

The Saint Monica Institute of Theology (SMIT) inaugurated the new academic year with a Symposium dedicated to a deeper study of our Discalced Augustinian spirituality, following the conferences delivered in Rome during the Convention on the Sources of Spirituality held in October 2025. The symposium was opened by the Prior Provincial, Fr. Luigi Kerschbamer. The following conferees presented their respective conferences:

Fr. Noel Cerna, Prefect of Students, with the lecture *“OAD Spirituality: Primary and Historical Sources.”*

Fr. Anthony Tien, alumnus of the Institute, who presented *“Complementary Sources: A Living Expression of Our Spirituality.”*

Fr. Renan Obregon, who spoke on *“Constitutions and Directory: Regulatory Codes of Our Spirituality.”*

Fr. Joel Manuel concluded with *“The Ritual: The Liturgical Celebration of Our Spirituality.”*



## Rome – Italy

### January 31 – February 1, Meeting of the General and Provincial Councils of the Augustinian Family

The meeting was inspired by the motto of Pope Leo XIV: *In Illo uno unum*, an expression deeply rooted in Augustinian spirituality.

Participants included members of the General Curia, Fr. Diones Rafael Paganotto and Fr. Airton Mainardi, and members of the Provincial Curia in Italy, Fr. Jan Derek Sayson, Fr. Leandro Xavier Rodrigues, Fr. Alejandro Remolino Jr., and Fr. Gregorio Cibwabwa.

The first day featured a conference by Rosanna Virgili, who offered a profound reflection on the theme: *“Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a*

*while”* (Mk 6:31), highlighting the originality of Jesus’ leadership, capable of uniting authority, service, and care for relationships. At 12:30 p.m., the Mass was celebrated, presided over by Fr. Diones Rafael Paganotto. In the afternoon, the conference of Sister Simona Paolini explored the juridical and canonical dimension in the light of the Pauline text: *“In him he chose us before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love”* (Eph 1:4), proposing a meditation on “in-existence” in Christ as the foundation of ecclesial and fraternal communion.

The second day was dedicated to fraternal moments, dialogue, and workshops, fostering a sincere exchange of experiences, reflections, and pastoral perspectives in a climate of mutual listening.



## Frosinone – Italy

### February 19–23, Canonical Visit of the Prior General

The Prior General, Fr. Nei Márcio Simon, accompanied by the Secretary General, Fr. Diones Rafael Paganotto, carried out the Canonical Visit to the Madonna della Neve Residence.

During the days spent in Frosinone, the Visitors shared in the ordinary life of the fraternity, taking part in community prayer, fraternal gatherings, and pastoral activities. The Prior General also held personal meetings with each religious, offering a privile-

ged opportunity for listening, evaluation, and encouragement.

In accordance with the proper law of the Order, the principal areas of community life were examined: the members of the community, the organization of spaces, and the maintenance of the official Registers, all in a spirit of shared responsibility and communion.

Among the significant moments were meetings with the Bishop of Frosinone, Msgr. Santo Marciànò, as well as encounters with the collaborators of the Shrine-Parish and with the Scout group.





## Rome – Italy

### February 21, Meeting of Young Augustinian Religious

The Meeting of Young Augustinian religious men and women was held at the Monastery of the Santi Quattro, centered on the theme *In illo uno unum*. Among the key moments of the gathering were the recorded message of Pope Leo XIV and the conferences delivered by Rosanna Virgili on the theme *In illo uno*

*unum: Reconciled in One Body*, and by Fr. Kolawole Chabi on *Unum in the Rule, in the Ecclesiology of Saint Augustine, and in the Pontificate of Leo XIV*.

The meeting was addressed especially to young religious in simple vows from 2010 to the present. Among the participants were also some of our professed members from the International College Fra Luigi Chmel in Rome.



## Spoletto - Italy

### February 26 - March 2, Canonical Visit of the Prior General

The Prior General, Fr. Nei Márcio Simon, and the Secretary General, Fr. Diones Rafael Paganotto, carried out the Canonical Visit to the Santa Rita Residence, spending several days with the confreres to take an interest in

the community life and the main activities carried out. The visit was a precious moment of listening, assessment, and encouragement, further enriched by moments of fraternal sharing and meetings with the Archbishop of Spoleto, Msgr. Renato Boccoardo, with the Parish collaborators, and with the team from the Pievany of San Ponziano.



# Message from the Prior General

## The Importance of Being Missionaries

Fr. Nei Márcio Simon, oad



Dear confreres, affiliates, and friends, to be missionaries today means to allow ourselves to be transformed by the love of Christ, welcoming His invitation to go out of ourselves and to meet others. Mission is not only an external action, but it constitutes a deep dimension of our Augustinian identity. We are therefore called to live fraternal communion, to seek the Truth together, and to give ourselves with humility and joy. Bringing the light of the Gospel to places often neglected is a responsibility that arises from the awareness of having been personally touched by the love of God.

Along the missionary journey, our very life becomes a living Gospel. Every gesture of charity, every authentic encounter, and every attentive listening are concrete ways through which we proclaim the Good News, even without words.

Mission asks us to become pilgrims of hope, open to the surprises of the Holy Spirit and attentive to recognizing the presence of God in the signs of daily life. It is essential to remember that mission is born from prayer

and is nourished by the Eucharist, an inexhaustible source of strength and perseverance.

Saint Augustine tells us: *“Let us run then, my brothers, let us run and love Christ. [...] Extend your charity over the whole world, if you wish to love Christ; for the members of Christ are spread throughout the whole world. If you love only a part, you are divided; you are no longer united to the body”* (In Ep. Jo. 10,8).

This teaching urges us to discern with courage and humility the path to follow. Therefore, let us entrust ourselves completely to the will of the Lord, remaining faithful to the charism we have received.

I invite you to persevere with an open heart, certain that the Lord never leaves us alone. His presence accompanies our steps, sustains us in difficulties, and renews our hope each day. Together, we can be authentic witnesses of a mission that is born from love and fulfilled in communion and service.

Happy journey!

