



Ferdinando Taddei, CM
Bishop of Jacarezinho
(1867-1940)

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In every time, in every country, and in every social-political context, it pleases the Lord to choose from among the people those whom he joins to his redeeming mission for the salvation of the people. Some are known universally, others are unknown, more often than not in their country of origin. Bishop Ferdinando Taddei belongs to this line of chosen souls who love their neighbor, who abandon themselves to the mysterious designs of Divine Providence, who suffer and preach the Gospel in foreign lands. This was his mission done with faithfulness and generosity in his daily life as a pastor, following the path of Saint Vincent de Paul, who was for him the teacher of life. From the pages of this brief biography, emerge the character and the work of a man of God, who in his more than 50 years of professed life knew how to leave, in the hearts of those whom he encountered, an indelible seal of his goodness. To make Bishop Ferdinando known to the public, and especially to his fellow citizens, constitutes an important pedagogical example in our time, a time marked by a growing relativism, joined with an egoism based in the individual.

Up to now, no works have been published that have remembered the figure of Bishop Taddei. In order to write the present biography, two direct sources were used: the documents that are in the General

Archive of the Congregation of the Mission in Rome,¹ and a manuscript preserved in the Diocesan Archive of Sora,² signed by Father Angelo Casoni, in which the prelate presents the figure of his friend, the bishop, on the occasion of a publication, which never went to press, about the Missionaries who came from the Diocese of Sora.

Ferdinando Taddei was born in Casalattico (Frosinone) on 9 February 1867. He was the son of Sebastiano and Colomba Nota, Christians of a piety that was not common, who lived an honest and hardworking life in the small town of Valle di Cominio. The next day the newborn was taken to the parish church of Saint Barbato to receive Holy Baptism. The country pastor, Don Antonio Vitti, performed the service. Ferdinando was of a good spirit and a warm character. From his earliest years he demonstrated a particular predilection for aiding any who suffered or were in misery. Many episodes from his childhood are remembered of this early goodness toward the poorest, where he frequently deprived himself of food and clothing to help his neighbor.



His education took place first in the schools of his native country and then in those of Alvito. When he finished his basic studies, and with the permission of his parents, he decided to enter the seminary of Sora to do his secondary education. It is here that he had a professor of letters, Msgr. Domenico Fortuna, who quickly praised his genius and love of study. Little by little as the years

¹ *Dictionnaire du personnel* [Personnel Dictionary] (2nd part, 1851-1900), n. 2951. The author appreciates the availability of the archivist, Father Agus Heru, CM.

² Archivo de la Diócesis di Sora-Cassino-Aquino-Pontecorvo, Serie C, Vescovi, Sottoserie II, Vescovi extradiocesani [Archives of the Diocese of Sora-Cassino-Aquino-Pontecorvo, Series C, Bishops, Subseries II, Bishops from Outside the Diocese], f.14.1.

passed, there matured in the soul of the young Ferdinando the call to religious life. His predisposition to help the neediest led him to the Congregation of the Mission, founded by Saint Vincent de Paul, where a cousin of his, Antonio Nota, was a priest. This cousin took him to Paris, where, at the age of 18, on the first day of October in 1883, Ferdinando entered the Internal Seminary of the Congregation. Before leaving Casalattico, he went to Monattico where an old man of that place, seeing him, said to the young seminarian: "Now you go, but if you do not finish, do not come again to these parts!" The words of this good old man wrote themselves in the mind and heart of Ferdinando, so much so that they became his life's program. After a journey particularly lively, the new missionary arrived at the Paris College on the street of Saint Lazare. At first, his life was not easy due to the way his French schoolmates created an atmosphere of distrust with respect to this just arrived "Italian"; but the young Taddei did not lose heart, just the opposite, he converted the situation into a motive to demonstrate to all his qualities by dedicating his days completely to study. In only two months, he learned to perfection the French language, so much so that the superiors, in admiration, said of him that he would be another Thomas, in memory of his illustrious compatriot from Aquino. Six months after his arrival, he recited in perfect French a talk in honor of the Virgin Mary that definitively put an end to the initial contempt of his classmates. The years passed until the moment of the solemn profession, which took place on 2 October 1885, before the Superior General of the Congregation, Rev. Antoine Fiat. Having reached his dream of being a son of Saint Vincent de Paul, he continued the time of formation, specializing in the study of the *Summa Teologica* of Aquinas. He was assiduous in prayer, continually going to the Celestial Mother for help, before whose image he spent hours in intense meditation.

The time came to embrace the life of a missionary, so on 21 July 1889, Ferdinando, at the age of 22, left Paris to go to Brazil. He was initially in the house of a family in the city of Bahia, where he was ordained a priest on 1 November 1890, and named rector of

the Seminary. He carried out this work for three years before being transferred, in 1893, to the House of Mercy in Rio de Janeiro, where he remained for a couple of months. The next year he arrived in the city of Caracas, where he developed his missionary and priestly activity for 18 years. In 1913, after a brief stay in the house of Saint Vincent in Rio de Janeiro, he was named superior of the retreat house in Curitiba where he remained for more than ten years. Wherever he arrived, he demonstrated a profound and strong pity above all for the weakest and neediest. He preached missions to the people and retreats to the clergy and various monasteries of monks. Nevertheless, these ongoing works did not distract him from the profound study of the sacred disciplines that were always his passion. "Reading is my leisure," he liked to say to those who asked him if he did not spend too much time closed up in his study. He cultivated this passion until the last years of his life because he never tired of learning. Along with his activity as a preacher, he joined that of an author, producing a number of small works of a spiritual character. He spoke fluently three languages: Spanish, French, and Latin. His love for culture motivated him to come to know, and frequently visit, many known persons in the intellectual world of Brazil who gave him profound love and esteem. In Italy, he was a very good friend of the monk of Monte Casino, Luigi Tosti, and when, in 1903, he returned to his homeland, he went immediately to visit him in Monte Casino, where the erudite Benedictine wanted to give him a copy of all of his works.

He kept himself informed of all the political and social events that took part in all parts of the world, especially in Italy. He constantly read the newspapers of Brazil and, when he encountered in them attacks on the Catholic religion, he immediately took pen and paper to respond in defense of her who was for him the mother of all virtues. His was a lively spirit and his speech was eloquent and sure, always ready to confront his rivals. His confreres began to call him the electronic bell because at just the suggestion of an argument he responded immediately. His great erudition and his missionary

zeal gave him notoriety in the eyes of illustrious persons of his time, among whom was the Bishop of Curitiba, Msgr. José de Camargo Barros, who held him in grand esteem from the beginning, to such a degree that the bishop wanted Father Ferdinando to be rector of the episcopal seminary. This image of the learned, erudite, and zealous Father Ferdinando is described in the magazine, *São Vicente*, where an animated writer gives us the image of this Italian missionary, from whose recounting we take other details of his life. "I saw him for the first time in 1894 in the College of Caracas; he came from the House of the Mercy of Rio, where he was a chaplain, to teach in the celebrated College. Some years later, I saw him again in Petropolis, where he spend some days of vacation. In 1915, I went to find him in Curitiba where he directed that seminary, replacing the superior who had left for the war. Three years later, losing hope that the superior would return, they gave the direction of the institute definitively to him.

The house in Curitiba, because it had few resources, lived in poverty. The procurator had to go to the Episcopal Palace at the end of each month to beg for the subsidy for the seminary, because almost none of the students paid the tuition and those that could pay used excuses to exempt themselves from doing so. A very poor house where most of the few students present did not pay. The result? No comfort. Just the opposite, many inconveniences. The new superior did not admit that this was the case. He spoke making light of the happy years he passed in Caracas and the missions that he had made in the company of the great missionary Father Lacoste. He had felt immensely the separation from Rio, where, for a time, he had been in charge of the Chaplaincy of the Immaculate Conception."

The dynamic character of Father Ferdinando did not remain passive before this problematic situation and so he made the resolution to talk with the Bishop of Paraná, Giovanni Braga, to propose to him the foundation of a diocesan center for secondary education (gymnasium), an idea the bishop enthusiastically approved. In 1925, the president of the State of Paraná, Caetano Munhoz da Rocha, decided to promote an educational reform for the institutes of secondary education, putting the work in the hands

of the Missionaries of Saint Vincent de Paul. Because he knew the fame of Father Ferdinando, the president wanted to meet him and, after a beneficial dialogue in the presence of Bishop Braga, which convinced the president of his capacities in the field of education, the president put Father Ferdinando in charge of the project. At the same time, with the permission of the Apostolic Vicar and the Ministry of Instruction, a presidential decree was promulgated, which made effective the naming of professors and the regulations of the soon to be secondary school institution. Taddei was radiant. The new scholastic institution contributed to the transformation of the religious physiognomy of the capital of Paraná, all thanks to the meritorious work of the missionary who came from Valle di Comino. For 30 years, Father Taddei taught in this institute, dedicating himself without rest to the education of the youth who so needed Christian formation. His students did not forget the lessons of their teacher to whom they gave the nickname of our intelligent and wise father. These long years of teaching are more than sufficient to sketch out the image of an enlightened missionary, of an expert educator who instructed so many students, who, in the course of time, occupied the highest and most desired assignments of the Brazilian State. The



sweat and fatigue connected to the field of education made him one of the meritorious figures of the Catholic religion in Brazil and the pride of his adopted country.

At the peak of his full scientific and literary maturity, the opportunity of a new work experience opened without warning for Father Taddei. When he was absent, the secretary of the Apostolic Nunciatura visited the house of the missionaries of Saint Vincent de Paul and examined with attention the private library of

Father Ferdinando. As he left, he affirmed in admiration: “the artist is appreciated for his equipment”. Father Taddei has a familiarity with the greatest saints and doctors of the Church, for this reason it is without doubt that he is also a saint and a learned religious. The motive of that visit was revealed in the beginning of 1927 when, at the door of the Seminary of Paraná, a diplomatic courier appeared to present a letter to Father Taddei. The content left the priest breathless and he communicated to his confreres with eyes inflamed in tears that he had been named the first Bishop of the Diocese of Jacarezinho. The diocese was erected on 10 May 1926, by means of the bull **Quum in dies numerus** of Pope Pius XI, taking the territory from the Diocese of Curitiba, which was contemporaneously elevated to the status of Metropolitan Archdiocese.



Curitiba (Brazil). Bishop José de Camargo Barros poses with a group of missionaries from Italy. To his right with a book in hand is Father Ferdinando Taddei.

Father Ferdinando accepted with profound humility the mandate, on condition that he did not have to renounce his Italian citizenship, something he held in high esteem. The ordination was an exceptional event when, on 29 June 1927, in the Cathedral of Rio de Janeiro, in the presence of senators, deputies, friends, and priests from all parts of Brazil, in the same church where many times his voice resounded, Father Ferdinando Taddei was elevated to the dignity of bishop. The solemn ceremony impressed itself in the mind of the new bishop who made his own the words of the Apostle Paul: the bishop must be blameless, sober, prudent, chaste, hospitable, modest, disinterested, and, moreover, be the example to his flock in words, conduct, charity,

faith, and chastity. Filled with these sentiments, he made his entrance into the Diocese of Jacarezinho. It was a true and proper triumph, preceded by the fame he earned during long years of missionary and educational activity as prefect and zealous missionary son of Saint Vincent de Paul. No elegant episcopal residence awaited him. There was not yet a curial seat or an episcopal house, but this did not bother him; his only preoccupation was to work, as he knew how to do, in a diocese that was poor and new, to organize it wisely at the cost of completing the most humble tasks himself. To begin with, he confronted the deepest wounds that existed in the vast diocese that had been given to him, examining the causes and finding the precise remedies with the publication of wise pastoral letters, particularly those that opposed Protestantism and Spiritism, which were still very present in those regions. He founded a college for women, which he entrusted to the Daughters of Charity. Always up to date with the latest events, he suppressed vigorously, both in speech and in writings in periodicals, every tentative attack against the Catholic religion, especially when Brazil was attacked by the Communist currents that seemed bound to tear the country apart. He became a promoter of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Carmelite know as the Little Flower. His intense apostolic activity did not go unnoticed in the Roman atmosphere of the Holy See. The Apostolic Nuncio in Brazil, Cardinal Benedetto Aloisi Masella, had great esteem for him. Speaking of him in Pontecorvo, he defined him as the most learned and untiring of Brazil's bishops.

In 1936, Bishop Taddei left for Italy. He had departed from there 53 years previously, as a simple novice and returned as a bishop. He arrived in Sora where he was



welcomed in the house of Father Angelo Cassoni. The bishop of the city, Msgr. Agostino Mancinelli, who held him in great esteem, warmly welcomed him. After a brief rest in the river city, he went to Rome where he developed an intimate friendship with the Carmelite Father Edmondo Maria Fuscuardi, a valued archaeologist, to whom he poured forth his soul presenting many projects of theological and pastoral studies that he wanted to accomplish. With him, he went first to Turin, to the Institute of Cotelengo, and then to France, where he returned to the International Institute of Formation Saint Vincent de Paul of Paris. To travel with him, Father Edmondo said, was most instructive and a lot of fun. He was interested in everything and, in everything, he always encountered the way to inspire feelings of piety and faith. When he arrived in Paris, he was given a very warm welcome by his confreres. Here he loved to take part in the acts of the community, delighting to see regular observance in action, and every day he invited two poor people in the refectory to sit next to him. He went to visit Lisieux where he was fortunate enough to be able to speak with the sister of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, to whom he exhibited, in perfect French, the devotion to the Carmelite Little Flower that he had built up in Brazil.

Returning to Rome, he was received in private audience by the Holy Father Pius XII, who gave him a special apostolic blessing. The bishop was so deeply impressed with this moment that he said, "Even if I die right now, I am happy!" Finishing the rest and trip to Europe in November 1936, Msgr. Taddei returned to Brazil, triumphantly received by his flock, who impatiently awaited him. However, he was advancing in age, and, with it, the first symptoms of that sickness appeared, which, from day to day, took away the strength of this tireless missionary, who slowly reduced his public commitments. After four years of sickness, on February 9, 1940, Bishop Ferdinando Taddei flew to heaven toward the open arms of the Father. He was 73 years old and 55 years of vocation. All mourned his death. At the announcement of his death, the President Munhoz da Rocha publicly stated that Brazil, and especially the State of Paraná, lost a great man and an untiring bishop.

Humble, a lover of regular observance, always close to the neediest, no matter how surly that person appeared, he was excited about every beautiful and holy occasion. Though he was an introvert, the result of his passion for study and letters, he had a huge heart always open to helping his neighbor.

An enlightened priest, zealous missionary, expert educator, shepherd solicitous for the material and spiritual needs of his sheep, he was alive with the spirit of his holy Founder, who saw God in creatures and Jesus in the poor he met. He carved in his soul the words: *tibi derelictus est pauper* [to you the helpless can entrust their cause] and deep in his heart thanked the Lord who had placed on his lips the divine Word and had taken possession of his life, torn it from his beloved native country, Casalattico, in order to make him the defender of those scattered around the world who had gone astray.

We end his biography with the account of what happened on the day of his death as told by Sister Catherine of Jacarezinho's College in a letter sent to the Mother General of the order: *"You asked me to write about the death and funeral of our so good and holy bishop. In addition to not knowing how to do it, I find myself without ideas. I feel a great dejection, a vacuum within me that I do not understand. In the morning, after an injection, he asked who was cooking. Knowing that it was Sister Philomena, he said, 'Well, today I can go to Mass.' He went and came back feeling well, talking to us about his plans; he asked for the car to go visit the workers of the palace. At 5:30 in the afternoon, he asked for a small snack, during which his doctor entered, accompanied by the secretary, and they found him bathed in sweat. He asked for a priest and spoke no more. He had entered the throes of death. Without having talked to each other, there were various priests present. Filling the room were 14 priests and 13 Daughters of Charity, who prayed without interruption while the priest gave him absolution. The agony of death lasted a half hour and he remained conscious up to the last minute. He breathed his last peacefully without a contraction, like a candle being blown*

out. His physiognomy remained calm and serene, as if he had fallen asleep. I spent the night in vigil, preparing the injections that would preserve the body.

The body was taken to our chapel and remained exposed until the 11th. During those two days, there was a veritable pilgrimage; rich and poor, men, women, and children took their turns to grieve next to the body. The parade was continuous because the whole city wanted to pay last respects to the deceased Bishop. The radio was silent, business stopped, the cinemas remained closed in mourning. Among the visitors were the confreres, Msgr. Santos, Bishop of Osis, and Msgr. Mazzaroto, Bishop of Punta Grossa, who had been students of Msgr. Taddei. The Mass and the funeral ceremony took place according to the liturgical rites; there were many priests who sang the Mass beautifully. All of this together, though painful, had the appearance of a triumph, of an apotheosis. The signing book, placed at the entrance of the Chapel, recorded 1700 names, besides those who did not sign, and the large number of poor and illiterate. Bishop Belchiorre of Cambara pronounced a beautiful funeral prayer, exalting in words filled with gratitude and admiration, all that Paraná owed to the late Bishop. Before placing the body in the tomb, the people asked that it be taken in procession through the streets of the city. It was a moving event. Before returning to the Chapel, the prefect gave a beautiful speech as an expression of the people's gratitude. The Prefect and other authorities addressed the President of the Republic in order to be able finally to bury him in the Chapel, in the sepulcher he himself had ordered built over the last two years. Bishop Taddei, on 1 November, would have completed 50 years as a priest and now celebrated the event in heaven. A few days before he died, I went to visit the family of a pupil of our free school and the father told me: Sister, Bishop Taddei will have a beautiful place in heaven when he dies, because he is a bishop who has removed misery from this land. Before he came here, no one took care of the poor. Today we have the hospital for when we are sick, the dispensary

that we need, visits to our homes, schools for our children, and all free. This poor man had tears in his eyes as he spoke these words. Another poor man, as the funeral procession passed through the city streets, said: 'For three years the Bishop helped me with money and other things. He is the best man I have known in all my life!' In the same way, there are many who remember the good things they have received!"

Translated from the Spanish by Miles J. Heinen, CM