
Don Compri: a Salesian in Japan in the footsteps of Venerable Cimatti

Tokyo - On Saturday, April 2, 1955, the eve of Palm Sunday, a 25-year-old Salesian seminarian from Turin, after a month-long journey by ship that began in Genoa, disembarked in Yokohama, Japan, the same port city south of Tokyo where only a few months ago another ship, the Diamond Princess, with 3200 passengers on board, landed and was quarantined because of Covid-19. That young seminarian was **Don Gaetano Compri**, now 90 years-old, with 65 years of mission in Japan and 62 years of priesthood. SIR met him in Chofu, a city in the metropolitan area of Tokyo, home to the parish, the Salesian Center and the "Cimatti Museum", dedicated to Venerable Monsignor **Vincenzo Cimatti**, the "Don Bosco of Japan" founder, in 1926, of the Salesian mission and activity in the Land of the Rising Sun, where he lived until his death in Tokyo on 6 October 1965 and of whom Don Compri was a student for 7 years. It also houses the chapel where the body of Msgr. Cimatti is kept, discovered inexplicably intact ten years after his death, when it was unearthed to initiate the cause of beatification. "I was blessed to meet Don Cimatti personally", said the Salesian priest, whom we asked to narrate to Agensir his missionary experience also in the light of the current events. "I was only 25 years old and I had to complete my last two years of theology. At that time all subjects were still being studied in Latin!", Don Compri recalled with a smile. *His bond with the Don Bosco of Japan remained undiminished.* He was named vice-postulator of his beatification cause, curator and, until a month ago, director of the museum dedicated to the Venerable. Don Compri is also the author of *"Vincenzo Cimatti, l'autobiografia da lui non scritta"*, fruit of a long and meticulous consultation of over ten thousand documents consisting of letters, circular letters, reports and articles, mostly authored by Msgr. Cimatti, whose collection is a true "autobiography" written by him. In addition to the Italian edition, Don Compri published the same collection in two volumes in Japanese. *"We are waiting for a miracle for his beatification" he told us, and added: "He was very humble and I think it is necessary to persevere greatly to persuade him to fulfil it."* In sixty-five years of missionary activity the ninety-year-old Salesian priest has been teacher and dean of Salesian schools and institutes, director of orphanages, collaborator of the Salesian publishing house in Tokyo, author of more than thirty texts in Japanese language, six on the Holy Shroud, of which he is an expert and tireless divulger in the Japanese world with conferences, seminars and exhibitions throughout Japan with the authentic replica received as a gift from the Archbishop of Turin. For more than two years he curated a television column where he presented the Old and New Testament in simple form: *"What matters most - he said, with amusement - is that eventually the presenter of the program, her husband and children were all baptized."* Don Compri's words clearly reveal a permanent missionary spirit that has never faded away, that gifted him with a special sensitivity for the Japanese people's way of feeling and thinking. "I learned from Don Cimatti that to evangelize Japan you have to love it, live it and understand it." His words remind us of an episode in the Venerable's life: travelling on a train he opened and ate his "bento", a sort of Japanese packed lunch, and a Japanese traveller, seeing him, told him "From the way you ate your bento I understood that you love Japan." A state of emergency has been recently declared in 7 Prefectures of Japan. We asked Don Compri to share with us his interpretation of the Covid-19 situation.

"Our Lord rules over and guides history, that is the story of salvation."

he affirmed, "and also this vicissitude must have a meaning and an implication for the good of humanity. This moment in time, in which we are compelled to slow down our pace and change the pattern of our everyday life, is to some extent an invitation to take our life back, to acknowledge our limits - evidenced by our helplessness before the onset of a small virus - to rediscover the centrality of the human person and the family at individual level and in the conscience of the ruling classes, and finally to question ourselves, in one way or another, about the meaning and purpose of our existence. *This seems to me a propitious time to return to God.*" These themes are dear to the Salesian priest

and have been the guiding thread of his missionary activity among Japanese believers and non-believers alike. He discussed and speaks about them constantly in his pastoral activity in the parish and in some of his books, writings, in simple and direct language, rooted in concrete life, in order to reach out to the many Japanese who do not know our faith. Such is the case of his latest work titled "Ninngnen toshite no testugaku", philosophy on man, which for the first time was selected by a lay publishing house having young people as its primary target audience, that published it in October last year. "In my view the world tends to remove and avoid these issues nowadays, but Japanese society in particular, entirely structured and oriented towards efficiency achieved through standardized procedures to be learned and carried out, doesn't help individuals to engage in in-depth reflection and thinking." He then explained that pupils are initiated into this mindset already at school and are therefore trained to learn answers or solutions by heart rather than processing and thinking them out. "That is why I wanted to write this book that incorporates and elaborates on the subject-matter of a previous publication of mine that I had titled "Ninghen or kangaeru", thought on the human person. Here too, as I always do, *I describe reality, ask questions and propose the Christian answer.*" A few months after its release the new coronavirus appeared to raise questions also among the Japanese people, who suddenly found themselves without school and work, which for them, more than for us Westerners, represent the landmarks of their culture and life, now replaced by family and home, with all the pros and cons. One final question: Don Compri, how did you spend Easter? "Religious communities have no particular restrictions and I could celebrate the rites of Holy Week here with the brethren," he said. "The parish however is closed, but *also this year I managed to prepare 5 adult Japanese catechumens for Baptism.*" Despite the coronavirus - continues the Salesian priest - the path was completed, although necessarily in private form. They were baptized here, in the parish of Chofu on the afternoon of Easter Day at 2.00 p.m., with the sole participation of godparents and close family members, complying with prevention and safety measures outlined by our Archbishop and by the Government."

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