

A Builder of Faith

ZAMBIA-MALAWI - My first encounter with Fr. Francesco Valdameri, SMM was in 1991 at Kalichero Parish, in Chipata Diocese of Zambia, where he worked for many years in different parishes. At that time, a classmate of mine told me that he was going to Kalichero for a "come and see" session because he was considering to become a priest. He asked me to come with him because they were looking for boys who wanted to become priests, but he didn't want to go there alone. The session lasted a week, it was meant to be an opportunity for us to know the Montfort Missionaries, their life and their work.

However, what caught my eyes in that week at Kalichero was that there was a priest who, after every morning mass, would carry people in his car bringing them to the maize mill in Chipalamba. This priest was called "*Bambo France*" instead of Francesco by the parishioners. His daily schedule started with morning prayers and mass, then bringing people to the maize mill and thereafter, he would leave for different places either to a school, a clinic, a church or to a bridge that was being built. Fr. Francesco had the energy of a soldier in the battle frontline. It was as if he was given a mandate to do the work of 88 years in 5 years. He was a priest who understood very well that a human being is soul and body together. He had a very particular way of winning the whole human person for God. He didn't just work to win souls for God but he worked for the integral human development. He was a shepherd who knew both the spiritual and physical needs of his flock. He scaled the unbeaten paths to reach the people of God in the remotest lands of Zambia and Malawi. This desire to reach those that were unreachable sometimes forced him to even physically build bridges. Living with him, I was struck by his faith and his closeness to people. He knew very well his sheep as a Good

Shepherd, his sermons touched the real life of the people whom he brought to the maize mill, the people for whom he built schools, clinics and churches. His conviction that God had sent him on the mission to Zambia was the very core of his total commitment for the well-being of the whole person's body and soul.

Fr. Valdameri had a great sense of humour and he did not fail to deliver a lesson of life to Christians in a humorous way. For example, one day we went to an *out church* where in a very normal way, the Christians were supposed to offer the priest a meal after mass as the stations were very far from the parish. This station on several weeks neglected this responsibility telling him: "*We are sorry father, we didn't prepare anything today for you.*" On this particular day, he was ready to deliver a lesson as the situation kept on repeating itself. The chairperson came and said to him again: "*Father, we are sorry because we are not able to give you food today.*" His response was: "*Eh! People of Mnutwa, you are now used to this behaviour. I will not leave this place until I see something to eat.*" He sat down waiting for food. One hour later, food was brought, we ate and returned back to the parish. What was interesting is that he was ready to wait the whole day until food was brought. From that day on, the people of Mnutwa were the best in feeding the priests who came to them for mass. The Montfort community at Kalichero was well-known for its delicious stone-grilled chicken every Sunday evening. We always sat around the red-hot stone on which the chicken was being roasted, praying the breviary and the rosary. Interestingly, Fr. Valdameri would be having a breviary in one hand praying, and a fork on the other hand, minding and tasting the chicken, being cooked on the fire. He did not only show his sense of humour but also showed his expertise in roasting chicken on a hot stone.

In his missionary vocation, both in Malawi and Zambia, he established more than 8 parishes and built more than 40 churches. In his last few years, we had several long conversations in which it was clear to me that his desire was to continue working until all his life was far spent. He still dreamt of a new parish and a new community of the Montfort Missionaries established in Zambia. He was very happy to see the beginning of the building of a new community which unfortunately he will not see its completion. He had given his whole life for Zambia and wanted at the end of his life to sleep in peace among the people of Zambia. This is why despite of his age and sickness, he couldn't just imagine that a day will come when he had to leave the people for whom he had given his entire life and return to Italy and sleep there. In the silence of a beautiful night, with clear starry heavens of Zambia, a drum announced his death on 23rd March 2020. Unfortunately, it was a death that took place in a far distance where none of his flock will be present. Instead of resting in silence among his flock, he now sleeps far away in Pieranica, a village in north Italy which he left 62 years ago at the age of only 26.

Fr. Francesco Valdameri will be greatly missed for his love, faith and service to human integral development regardless of their religion. He was a builder of faith, school, clinics, churches, bridges and above all, love. To me he was a father, a mentor, a confrere, and a friend. I pray to the Lord for his eternal reward. May the voice of the Lord resound to him: "*Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master*" (Matt. 25:23). Our prayer is "*Hasten to meet him, angels of the Lord! Receive his soul and present him to God the Most High. May Christ, who called him, take him to Himself; may the angels lead him to the bosom of Abraham.*"

Fr. Felix Mabvuto Phiri, SMM

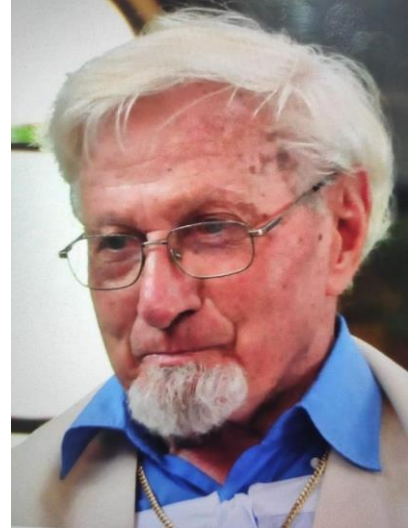
Farewell to Fr. Francesco Valdameri, SMM

BLANTYRE, Malawi – The confreres, the clergy, the religious and the laity in Malawi and Zambia have been saddened following the announcement about the death of Fr. Francesco Valdameri, SMM on 23rd March 2020 in Bergamo, Italy.

Fr. Paul Mashonga, SMM, the Superior Delegate of Africa Anglophone General Delegation says that it is a great loss to the delegation and the entire Montfortian family.

“I remember Fr. Francesco as a pastor who was available, generous and committed to Christians and all people. He has also contributed a lot in our entity towards putting up our community in Zambia. I will not hesitate to name the community as Valdameri Community. It is a great loss to the delegation and the whole congregation,” he shared in a sombre mood.

Fr. Fanuel Lungu, the Communications Officer of Chipata Diocese in Zambia grieved in announcement to Zambian Christian community about the death of Fr. Valdameri.



“Fr. Valdameri worked for a long time in this diocese of Chipata since 1977 or so, beginning from Chassa Parish, Mbwindi Parish, Kalichero Parish, Mphangwe and eventually in Kafumbwe Parish and Mphangwe Prayer Center where he departed from, when he went back home to Italy where he has finally answered God’s call to heavenly journey. Fr. Valdameri will be remembered in the diocese for great service and par excellence example of self-giving,” Fr. Fanuel stated in the funeral announcement of Chipata diocese.

Fr. Piergiorgio Gamba, SMM says that Fr. Francesco will be remembered as a Montfortian with zeal for missions and holistic development of the people.

“He was our eldest brother, a link between confreres in old generation and young generation. His zeal for missions and development of the people was par excellence. He built churches, parishes, schools and clinics. He easily adapted the changes in the Church following the resolutions of Vatican II, a time when many missionaries left, finding it difficult to adapt the changes. We will greatly miss him,” he shared reviving the memories of the life of Fr. Francesco.

Fr. Felix Phiri, SMM, the Assistant General responsible for Africa and Madagascar, says that Fr. Francesco was a shepherd who knew both the spiritual and physical needs of his flock.

“He was a priest who understood very well that a human being is soul and body together. He had a very particular way of winning the whole human person for God. He didn’t just work to win souls for God but he worked for the integral human development. He scaled the unbeaten paths to reach the people of God in the remotest lands of Zambia and Malawi.”

Fr. Felix, who first encountered Fr. Francesco in 1991 at Kalichero Parish, in Chipata Diocese of Zambia stressed that Fr. Francesco will be greatly missed for his sense of humour, love, faith and service to human integral development regardless of their religion.

The last weeks before he left for Italy, Fr. Francesco came to Malawi and visited the missions and the Christians in parishes where he served since 1958 such as Mpiri, Utale, Nsanama and Masuku. Roberto Locatelli, well-known as Brother Roberto who stays in Montfort Media community in Balaka accompanied him in all the journeys.

“He felt very happy to visit the parishes and especially meeting the Christians he knew in 1958 and 20 years after. These old people were full of smiles and joy to meet Fr. Francesco. It was as if he was saying bye to us,” he shared during an interview.

Fr. Francesco was born on 29th January 1932 in Pieranica, Italy. In 1946, at the age of 14, he joined Redona school in Bergamo where Montfort Missionaries lived. He entered novitiate in 1950 at Loreto and continued with philosophical and theological studies. On 16th March 1957, he was ordained priest. A year later, he was asked to go for the mission in Africa. He arrived in Malawi in 1958 and started his missionary apostolate at Mpiri, Nsanama and Masuku in Machinga district. 20 years after, he left for Chipata, Zambia where he served in the following parishes: Chassa, Mbwindi (Mbuini), Kalichero, Mphangwe, Kafumbwe and Mphangwe Prayer Center.

Fr. Francesco Valdameri, SMM died on 23rd March 2020, aged 88 with 69 years of Religious Profession. May his soul rest in Eternal Peace. AMEN.

*Fr. Jairos Mpina, SMM
St. Louis Montfort - Balaka Parish*