

FR. JAMES CAMISASSA
Co-founder of the Consolata Missionaries

A talk given by the then Mgr. G. Barlassina, IMC
Prefect Apostolic of Kaffa (Ethiopia)
at the tomb of Fr. Camisassa
on the First Anniversary of his death
18th August, 1923

(A slightly abridged translation)

*"We certainly will not forget him [Fr. James Camisassa] and all the good he did to our Institute,
for which he sacrificed himself up to the very end of his precious and holy life."
(Bd. Joseph Allamano's letter to his missionaries, dated 20th June, 1923)*

My brothers and sisters here present today,

How many memories crowd into our minds, and how many emotions in our hearts, as we are gathered around the tomb of a man, a priest, whom all of us loved (and still love) and to whom we owe and wish to express our tremendous gratitude.

All of us knew him; his figure is still present to all of us, and he still speaks to us. It seems to me that, as a good and loving father, he is telling us today what our Divine Master told his disciples: "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done..." (Jn 13:15).

My brothers and sisters, let us re-live the precious time we spent with him; let us treasure more than ever his teachings so as to put them into practice, and his examples so as to imitate them.

"The just will flourish like the palm-tree" (Ps. 91:12)

These words from the Psalm summarize in the best possible way the whole of Fr. Camisassa's life: from birth to death. He was the just man who, relying on his humble, living and ardent faith, in all simplicity could work wonders. His deep faith was the source of his on-going, manifold and beneficent activity.

I do not wish to go through the whole of his life. I simply wish to offer to your consideration some of the more meaningful moments, and point out not so much what he did but how he did it, so that we may imitate him.

We know that he was born at Caramagna (Piedmont) on 2nd September, 1854, and lived his infancy within the loving atmosphere of his deeply Christian family. He soon manifested his lively temperament and his open and sharp intelligence. From the time of his primary education, he was pointed out as a model of virtue and irreproachable conduct. He excelled in his studies in secondary school, as well as in Philosophy and Theology. He aroused admiration and trust: various tasks of responsibility were entrusted to him, like being a prefect, etc.

On 15th June, 1878, he was ordained a priest and, after the usual two years of further studies in moral and pastoral theology, he was ready to go to Pecetto Torinese and undertake his ministry as Assistant Parish Priest. But, at the request of the new Rector of the Consolata Shrine (Fr. Joseph Allamano), the Archbishop asked him to go to the Shrine and assist the new Rector in his important task. This is how these two priests came together: two priests, very dear to us, interesting and great,

who remained together for a long time and gave origin to and developed a great variety of good works, in various fields, through their on-going dedication, creativity, and zeal, for the glory of God. Not least among the fruits of their work and co-operation is certainly the foundation of the Consolata Missionaries.

I just wish to mention very briefly some of the many tasks performed by Fr. Camisassa. He was Vice-Rector and Bursar at the Consolata Shrine. He was faithful to praying the Divine Office in the Cathedral (as a Canon), and dedicated to his priestly ministry and to his teaching at the Pontifical Faculties of Theology and Canon Law (in Torino). A particularly great work he did for the renovation and enlargement of the Consolata Shrine, by facing and overcoming technical and financial difficulties through his dedication, love, and practical intelligence.

Now I wish to spend some more time in reflecting, together with you, on the best work of his life, the one that, for us, is the richest in example and teaching: the beginning and development of the Consolata Missionary Institute and its organization both in Torino and in Africa. With a truly deep passion he dedicated and consecrated to this all his strength, all his talents and abilities, the whole of himself. It was in this work that the splendid effects of his faith, virtue, zeal and perseverance were manifested; his inexhaustible mine of creative ideas, practical projects, teachings and continuous examples was discovered.

In 1900 we see him next to our beloved Founder in laying the foundations of an Institution that, like a mustard seed, with God's blessing grew into our flourishing Missionary Institute.

An external, superficial onlooker might have seen in our Co-founder only a marvellous and untiring activity. However we, who had the privilege of being close to him, could detect and admire his great virtue which was not inferior in the least to his technical ability and constant activity.

The sincere affection, profound respect, submission and reverence that he always showed his Superior (Fr. Allamano), even if at first sight they might have appeared just as companions, was a wonderful picture to admire and a solemn lesson to learn. Even if they lived together, had confidence in one another, and enjoyed a good degree of intimacy, even if Fr. Camisassa was aware of his gifts, he never lost or lowered the respect and veneration he had for his Superior: and this was expressed not by words, but by deeds. These two great souls had become one, without however, any confusion of identities and roles. Fr. Camisassa took care of all the Institute's more material concerns, but in matters of living and acting, directives and discipline he always accepted, with no resistance and effort whatsoever, the firm and sure will of his Superior. In fact, many of us had a chance to see situations in which, after having expressed his opinion, sustained his reasons, his way of seeing, and manifested his desires, at a simple "No" of our beloved Rector, Fr. Camisassa would desist and accept the decision. Furthermore, if the same matter came up again, he would support his Superior's decision and say, "This is how our Rector wants it" or "The Rector wants it" (1). In such a way, besides showing us the material foundations for which he worked and on which our Institute was based and elevated, he -- even if not bound by vows and rules -- with his docility, acquiescence and submissiveness showed us the moral foundations which constitute the basis of any religious Institute, i.e., humble submission, sincere appreciation of and respect for one another, and unity of hearts and minds ("*Cor unum et anima una*"), without which nothing really good and lasting may be accomplished. As we consider and admire these shining examples of our Co-founder, let us accept the challenge that comes to us from them and learn from them.

Another precious and magnificent example given by him to all those who could see him more closely in his daily activity is the deep concern, dedication and diligence with which he performed all his works, of any kind and magnitude; for him any matter, small or great, was important and had

(1). The Consolata Missionaries and their students used to call Fr. Allamano "the Rector", and Fr. Camisassa "the Vice-Rector".

to be accomplished well. As he explicitly said several times, he was against anything performed as a "show", which at the most obtained some vain and passing glory for the "actor" but did not produce any good and lasting results. Aware of the importance of religious and divine matters, of anything related to Mission and souls that he had to deal with, convinced that any small thing done for God was of a somehow infinite value and was worth of all attention and concern, he never did anything carelessly; he never left anything only half-done. He carefully examined and analyzed any matter he had to deal with; any work undertaken by him was carried on to full accomplishment. He never performed any good work so as to just get rid of it in the shortest possible time: he always aimed at achieving the best possible result in the best possible way. In spite of the ever increasing amount of work, worries and thoughts that were in his mind, he always looked after all the works that were being done, thought of and studied possible ways of doing them better, and thought and studied about new things to do; he would take up again what had been left pending, in order to try in different ways to overcome the difficulties encountered and bring them to completion not just anyhow, but in the best possible way.

People who did not witness the birth and first developments of our Institute may not properly understand all the difficulties of the beginnings: the dedication and concentration that was required to attend to everything, all the details, the various needs and situations, the variety of opinions and possibilities to choose from, etc. At that time nobody had any experience in this regard. Even today most of us are unaware of many things. How much easier it would have been at that time to overlook them. Yet, Fr. Camisassa managed to see everything. He succeeded in preparing the shipments of supplies needed in Africa that were real masterpieces of research and organization; all needs were cared for: those of the chapels, missions, schools, dispensaries, houses, kitchens, workshops and farms, communities and individuals. Everything was properly thought of, tested, selected and packed under his supervision. At times certain items had been specially made in ways that he himself had devised.

In spite of this tremendous amount of work, he never lost his composure, and never talked about it. However, we know very well that the days -- no matter how full and how busy -- were not sufficient. He used to work very hard until midnight. Then he went to bed. It is difficult to say whether he could really rest. All the thoughts and worries that were in that volcano of his mind must have been "boiling" even during the night. It is a fact that he always kept on his bedside-table a small note-book and a pencil, so that, when he woke up during the night, he would put in writing either new or better ideas, plans, solutions, etc. So, even during the night he solved difficulties met the previous day and provided himself with still more work for the next day. Worth mentioning is the fact that, while he was taking care of this tremendous amount of work for our Institute, he continued to carry out his responsibilities and duties as a priest, lecturer, etc. with edifying regularity, devotion and zeal.

When 1910 arrived, there was the foundation of the Consolata Missionary Sisters. On this occasion Fr. Camisassa better revealed some traits of his personality and character. Before the official foundation, he dedicated his mind and heart to make sure that the new institution would have a good beginning and a guarantee of development, and to provide for the well-being of the Sisters themselves. He thought, studied and provided for everything: a convenient building with sufficiently comfortable furnishings, so that community life and individual responsibilities would not be unnecessarily difficult; as a good mother would do, he worked to provide the new Sisters, brides of Christ, with a religious habit that was gracious and serious, worthy of their Bride-groom, but at the same time suitable to the times and to missionary work. Also in this, as in all his activities, he tried to accomplish what he had to do with his distinctive characteristic: without offending poverty and the religious spirit, but with a sense of art, gentleness and good taste, which

rendered what was done more dignified, more gratifying for people and, at the same time, capable of elevating hearts and minds to God.

So far, we have considered some of the accomplishments of Fr. Camisassa here in Torino. And these are already more than sufficient to fill a person's life. However, in spirit he was also present in Africa to literally *plan, direct* and watch over all the spiritual and material activity of our missions in their beginnings and developments. Many times his contribution in this regard was essential and decisive. This is true not only for Kenya, our first mission field that he always felt as part of his life, but also of Kaffa (Ethiopia) and Iringa (Tanzania). He had an immediate perception of the importance and particular difficulties of our Kaffa mission. The one who is speaking to you today had personal experience of this and feels a deep sense of gratitude to him. His loving fatherly concern, efficacious help, and valid advice were a great support for us and made easier the very difficult task entrusted to us. He was always ready to come to our help both morally and materially: he provided what we needed, answered our questions, offered advice and suggestions, put up with our shortcomings and always encouraged us. Our hard work and perseverance were the reflection of his unwavering faith in the bright future of this mission. He communicated to us his intuitions by means of frequent and long letters. The Lord rewarded all his efforts by allowing him to see his desires and work crowned by good and promising results.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I did not intend to talk about all his work, virtues and merits. I just presented some of the examples he gave us, so that we may imitate them in our daily life.

Usually, to perpetuate the memory and examples of some famous and dear person, people have statues carved, or monuments built, or big books printed about him/her.

Even without these, we have his dear image clearly printed on our hearts; his shining examples are vividly present in our minds. However, we should build a monument to this priest who during his life always shunned any form of praise, a monument pleasing to him: we should be such a monument, we and our Institute. We have to keep the characteristics of our founding fathers and transmit them unaltered to our children. The foundation stone of such a monument has already been laid by our Founders themselves; we have to continue and bring to fulfilment their work, following the same rules and spirit they followed, working hard as they did, in unity of hearts and minds, making full use of our talents and performing our individual tasks in the best possible way.

My brothers and sisters, as we commemorate our Co-founder and pray for him, let us make sure that the perennial and grateful memory of this priest, who spent all the best energies of his life and the best affections of his heart for us, may become more deeply impressed on our hearts and minds, and bear good fruit.

May he rest in peace!