

JEAN CASSAIGNE (1895-1973)

Bishop Jean Cassaigne was born in Grenade-sur-Adour, in the Landes region of France, on January 30, 1895. He lost his mother prematurely and was sent by his father to Spain to study in a college run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He returned to France around age seventeen to help his father in his work, but he felt attracted to the missions and expressed his desire to become a missionary. Just as he was preparing to enter the Rue du Bac Seminary, he learned of the declaration of war between France and Germany. He then enlisted at the age of nineteen. He spent five years at the front as a liaison officer, participated in the Battle of Verdun, and was decorated with the Military Cross. After demobilization, in 1920 he entered the Seminary of the Foreign Missions of Paris, was ordained a priest on December 19, 1925, and left for Indochina on April 6, 1926. He was first sent to Cai-Mon, an important Christian community in the province of Ben-Tre, Vietnam, to learn Vietnamese.

Arriving at the mission, like others, Jean Cassaigne, dedicated the first months of his missionary life to the study of the local language and customs and was introduced to pastoral care in the Vietnamese context, in the large parish of Cai-Mon. The following year he was sent by his bishop, Isidore Dumortier, to Djiring (Di-linh) on the highlands of the Upper Dong Nai, to establish a new Christian community among the peoples of the mountains of this region, inhabited by the Sré, also called Koho. At the time, the Djiring region was populated almost exclusively by ethnic minorities, because the Vietnamese had not yet settled in the highlands.

From the moment he arrived, Jean carefully studied the local language, which was very different from the Vietnamese language, and soon began to compile a lexicon and a conversation manual. The young missionary quickly began to make contact with the animist populations, but they were wary and probably afraid of the bearded stranger. It is possible that the people of the forest (called Moïs, or “savages”) had never seen a white-skinned European. Little by little, however, with his smile and his amiability, Jean succeeded in approaching them.

He discovered then the misery of those people, forced by various circumstances to move away from their natural environment. Obligated to leave the forest where they usually found their subsistence, undernourished, without clothes, they were easy prey for any kind of disease. And among them, Jean discovered the sickest and unhappiest of all: the lepers, rejected by their families, abandoned in the forest, without shelter or care, waiting only for death to put an end to their suffering. Those poor people, excluded from society, deeply moved his missionary heart. It was then that he made the commitment to devote all his strength to serving them. Slowly, the Moïs accepted his presence and began to seek him out.

At that time, many French plantation owners, who had obtained land concessions from the colonial government to farm the Djiring plateau, asked the mission to create a Christian community. The Paris Foreign Missions Society found the proposal interesting and worthy of being welcomed. Bishop Dumortier, for his part, saw a providential opportunity to begin evangelization in that region. The mission then acquired a house, which at the same time served as a residence for the missionary and as a school for the children of the mountain populations. With the help of some men, Jean Cassaigne built for them the small village of Kala, not far from the village of Djiring. Made up of huts on stilts, as inhabitants of the country often constructed their homes, Jean called it the “City of Joy.” And then, little by little, he gathered the lepers around him. He considered them his own children, provided them with food, and cared

for them every day. In 1929, the village of lepers was enlarged and there were already a hundred patients.

In 1930, Father Cassaigne had baptized his first two catechumens and several families asked to become Christians. At the center of the village there was an infirmary where he distributed medications and other medical care three times a week. He took care of the lepers himself and, with religious instruction, prepared them to die as Christians. In one corner of the village was the lepers' chapel where, on Sundays, prayers were recited in Koho and catechism lessons were held.

In 1935, Jean, with the help of his faithful catechist Joseph Braï and the collaboration of a hundred lepers, founded an autonomous village in Kala, near Djiring, to gather and care for the Moï lepers of the region. A few months later, he had the joy of baptizing twenty-six catechumens in a completely new chapel. It was the beginning of the first Christian community of mountain populations, which would continue to develop in the future. By 1936 there were two hundred.

In 1937, a visitor of the Daughters of Charity, Sister Clotilde Durand, moved by the dedication of this missionary who personally treated the lepers, promised him the help of the order. Four Daughters of Charity arrived at the village in February 1938 and began to treat lepers.

In 1941, a telegram from Rome pulled Jean Cassaigne away from his lepers. The Pope had appointed him bishop, making him responsible for the Apostolic Vicariate of Saigon. Despite his disinterest in honors, he had to agree to "go down" to Saigon. He received episcopal ordination on the feast of Saint John, June 24th. A crowd of three thousand people gathered in the cathedral of Saigon for the ceremony, and among them was an important delegation of the people of the mountains in traditional costume, coming to represent the Christian community of Djiring.

In Saigon, Bishop Cassaigne brought his personal style with him. Though he certainly carried out his responsibilities and respected the expectations of his ministry, in his daily life, Cassaigne remained a simple and welcoming

man. He always left the door open; everyone – poor and rich, without distinction of race or social background – was welcome without appointment. He maintained this burdensome task for fifteen years, through which he faced many difficulties, both during the Japanese occupation and during the Franco-Vietnamese war. During this turbulent period, he put his energies at the service of all, organizing aid and relief for those most in need, without preferences or exceptions. The Japanese themselves paid homage to the love of neighbor and the dedication shown by Bishop Cassaigne.

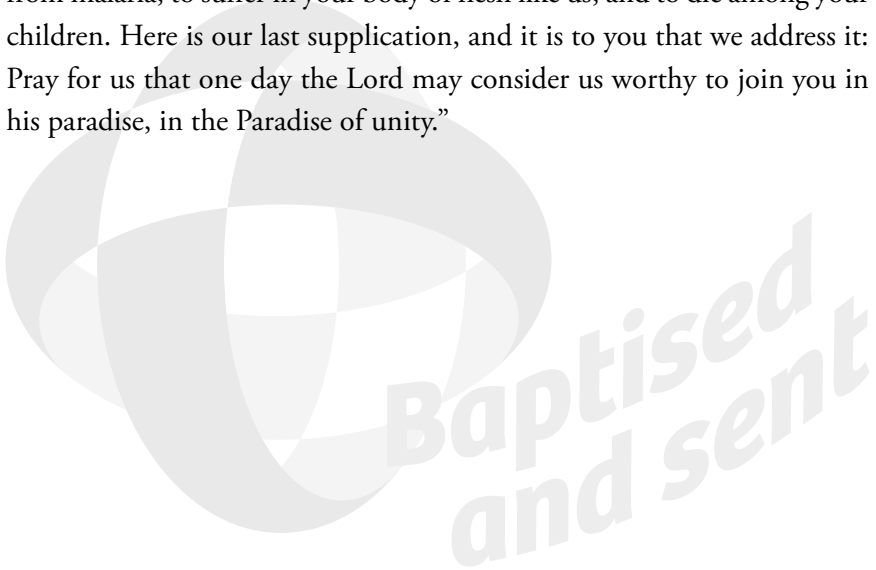
He, however, had one desire in his heart: to return to live with his dear mountain people. When he learned that he had also contracted leprosy, he submitted his resignation as apostolic vicar of Saigon to the Holy See. The Pope accepted it, giving Cassaigne the great joy of returning to live among his lepers in December 1955. From that point, he would never leave them again.

Returning to Djiring, his only concern was to provide adequate material assistance to his people, and above all to offer them the spiritual help that made them happy people. He loved them so much, was so close to them, and mingled with them so intimately that, struck himself by leprosy, he chose to live out this suffering alongside them. And at the end of his life, despite his pains and bedridden by illness, he always maintained joy, a radiant and communicative joy that one day made him say to his friends, “The good Lord loves me, because he chose for me the best prayer, which is suffering, the one he reserves for friends.”

Bishop Cassaigne died on October 31, 1973, and, according to his wishes, was buried in the small cemetery of the leper colony, where he himself had dug the grave for his first convert. The gratitude of the lepers to Bishop Cassaigne was expressed in a moving way on the day of his burial by one of the lepers, who took the floor on behalf of his sick brothers and addressed this message to him:

“O Father, you have shown us the true way to heaven, and this leper colony is your work. Thanks to you, we did not lack anything: food, clothes,

medicines. You sought them for us.... Dearest Father, deprived as we are of everything, we can only thank you and pray to the Lord for you. Today we want to live your teaching, to keep alive the bond of love between us and the way you loved us, to suffer in our flesh of sorrow, as you taught us to suffer during your life among us. Father, when you were alive, you wanted to identify with us, you wanted to contract leprosy like us, to suffer from malaria, to suffer in your body of flesh like us, and to die among your children. Here is our last supplication, and it is to you that we address it: Pray for us that one day the Lord may consider us worthy to join you in his paradise, in the Paradise of unity.”



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