

CANOSSIAN CENTENARY

Address on the Centenary of the Canossian Sisters in Hong Kong, delivered by Father T. F. Ryan, S.J., at Sacred Heart Canossian College on Wednesday, May 4.

THE celebration of centenaries is rare in Hong Kong. That is only natural because the Colony itself is little more than a hundred years old. However, we are beginning to celebrate them now, and these early ones are particularly interesting because they show how rapidly some other things followed when once the Colony came into life. It is only a few years since we celebrated the centenary of the coming of the Fathers of the Institute of Foreign Missions of Milan, who have supplied the diocese with priests ever since, and now this year we record the hundredth anniversary of the coming of the Italian Sisters.

This year in fact is one in which two centenaries are being celebrated. One is this which we are honouring today; the second is the addition of Kowloon to the Colony of Hong Kong. Need I point out that the Sisters came first?

Many of you have heard already the story of the coming of the Sisters, so I shall say little about it, but it is so good a story that I must say something.

It is always hard to get Sisters for a newly established mission area, because there are never enough to go round, and it was particularly hard in the middle of the last century, because new missions were opening up everywhere, and all of them wanted Sisters for their schools. It was of course equally hard to get priests, and the Prefect Apostolic who was in charge of the Hong Kong Mission achieved a great triumph when he got the Italian Fathers, but then he wanted Sisters.

There must have been much conferring between the Prefect Apostolic and the newly arrived priests, and I wish I knew who was the inspired man who must one day have slapped the table and said: "I've got it. Get the Canossian Sisters."

Someone else might have said: "No chance. They are wanted all over Italy, we'd never get them," but I do not think anyone did. They were not men like that, those early missionaries to Hong Kong. They must all have known the difficulty, however, for a very shrewd step was taken. The negotiations were put in the hands of the Superior of the Milan Institute of Foreign Missions.

Now let me tell you why this was a shrewd step. The great helper in all matters concerning the Italian Fathers was the man chiefly responsible for their



St. Mary's Canossian College, Kowloon, at some remote period in the past. (Not having a fashion editor, the Sunday Examiner cannot deduce the date.)

foundation, Mgr. Ramazzotti, and he had been made Patriarch of Venice. He was the outstanding man in the Church in North Italy, and he was a man of universal zeal. The Superior of the Institute was the one whom he, the Bishop, had installed as its first superior, and if he asked for something which would further the work that the Fathers were doing, he could certainly rely on the Bishop's help.

There is no need to remind you of the succession of wonderful men who have filled the office of Patriarch of Venice. There was the great saint of our own century, St. Pius X. There is that princely democrat and idolised Pontiff, our present Holy Father, and a hundred years ago there was Mgr. Ramazzotti. He died before he could receive the cardinalate for which he was designated, but he needed no other title to have his memory honoured, he was one of the great churchmen of his time.

This wise and dynamic bishop was well acquainted with the Canossian Sisters, who were the spearhead of the drive for Catholic education in North Italy. He had already introduced them into a diocese where he had earlier been Bishop and they looked upon him as their great friend.

The Superior of the Institute therefore told the Bishop about the request for the Sisters to go to Hong Kong where the Fathers were working. He thought it a splendid idea and wrote off at once to the Mother Superior to ask if she would send some Sisters. The Mother Superior replied that she was very sorry,

but it was not within her powers. According to their Constitutions they were formed to do work among children in Italy, and beyond that she could not go.

What did the Bishop do then? As they were no aeroplanes in those days he had to be satisfied with a train, but he took the first train to Rome and saw the Pope, and asked to have the Constitutions changed. And what did the Pope do? What he did was substantially to say the Italian equivalent of "Give me my pen", and in their Constitutions the Canossian Sisters forthwith extended their work to the bounds of the earth.

Back went the Bishop then, making only one stop on the way, to pick up the money necessary for the Sisters' voyage, and then on to see the Mother Superior. There was no question of letters this time, he just went in and said:

"Here now, Sisters, are the altered Constitutions, especially changed by the Pope so that you can go to Hong Kong. Now what about it?"

As you all here know, if there is anyone who can say a very firm and determined "No" when she wants to, it is a Rev. Mother. This time, however, there was not any danger of a no, and in any case one did not give one easily to Mgr. Ramazzotti. All the Mother Superior did was to sigh, and say, "Now they will all want to go to Hong Kong."

And they did. Only a few could be spared, but, as has happened ever since, they were the best. So they went and in April 1860 they arrived in Hong Kong.

Then, you might expect that I should say, they began to look around. Not at all; within eighteen days they had opened a school — and filled it. The school was for European children, and their mothers were charmed. Many of them said that it was wonderful, just what Hong Kong needed, to train our children to be little ladies. Later on, they said, we hope you will have a finishing school.

"Oh, not at all," the Sisters replied, "we are here to teach the Chinese. Next month we are opening a school for Chinese girls."

Then the sky fell. In those days there were not schools for Chinese girls.

As you know, things are always being done in Hong Kong that other people try to tell us we should not do. A few years ago we had no airfield to take big planes, so in certain other airports there was rubbing of hands, and it was said that Hong Kong had no ground on which to build an airfield, so it would drop back to a place of secondary importance. But Hong Kong builds a strip of ground a mile and a half into the sea, and then they say: "Oh, you shouldn't do that. That might be very dangerous."

Then Hong Kong had a million refugees and everyone was most sympathetic. But we had to find work for them, so we started spinning and weaving factories. But others said: "You must not do that. We are the people who make cloth, we shall sell you all your want."

Then we began plastic factories, and with characteristic Chinese taste and ingenuity began to make finer plastic flowers than were ever made before. Soon others were saying: "But you mustn't. Your flowers are too much like real ones. If people see them they won't buy ours."

Then we began to make suits of clothes, and through skill and hard work made them better and cheaper than any others. Then a country ten thousand times the size of ours said: "You must stop. If you don't you'll ruin us. Hong Kong must not be allowed to bully us."

So you see people are always blaming us for what we do. And it all began with the Canossian Sisters. They opened schools for Chinese girls when others said it was all wrong; that it was never done before, that Chinese girls should remain at home, that it would ruin the country.

The Sisters went on, and to-day we see the transformation.

What has been their work since then? Here on the spot on which we stand there began that great school that has more pupils than ever the University dreams of having. From the first house, a short distance up the road, given them by that early scion of the D'Almada family, the Sisters saw this open space, and with a vision that others envy they opened their school, and it would be hard to find a single year in the hundred that have passed when they did not add something new to their activities in Hong Kong.

When Wanchai grew they went to Wanchai. When Tsun Wan was bigger than Kowloon they went to Tsun Wan. When Kowloon, after a slow start, began to grow they transferred to Kowloon. When Shaukiwan ceased to be just a village they went to Shaukiwan. In the New Territories and on Lantau they were pioneers. Was it schools, or orphanages, or hospitals, or a home for the blind, or help for the boat people in Aberdeen, or the teaching of domestic science, or of botany, or of music, or of twenty other things? In all they were in the lead.

All that I have mentioned is in the field of secular achievement, but there was never any doubt of the motive that inspired their work, or of the spiritual work that went hand in hand with every activity, whatever it was; nor did they ever give any example but of shining sincerity, self-sacrifice and devotion.

Who can measure which of their achievements stands first in its value before God and man? It is not for us to know, but there is one thing that stands out as of such dazzling worth that it must be signalized: They have been pioneers, and they have continued on a wider scale than all others, in putting the ideal of Christian womanhood before the girls of Hong Kong in their schools. There was old paganism in Hong Kong when they came to it; there is new paganism to-day. There are dangers without number besetting the young, but there is glorious idealism in youth, and there is heroism, when one appeals to it. You are standing now on holy ground where the Sisters put before the youth of Hong Kong those ideals of Catholic youth to which the generosity of so many has so nobly responded.

All honour to these daughters of Magdalen of Canossa. We sing to-day a *Te Deum* of thanksgiving for the blessings that God has given to them during the last hundred years. It would be fitting to sing another for all that they have done for Hong Kong. You, I am sure, are singing it in your hearts on this great day and are praying with confidence that their work may continue, and grow, and be blessed for another century, and for many more centuries to come.

Canossian History

