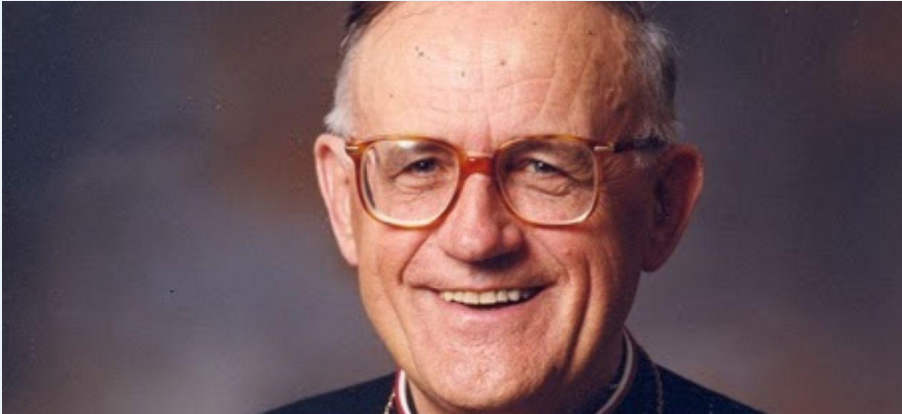




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OMIWORLD NEWS

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Remembering Father Marcello Zago, OMI: A Heart Open to the World

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25 years after he was called home, we remember the visionary heart of Father Marcello Zago. These personal notes reveal how his passion for dialogue among all people first took root. It was the beginning of a life of service that led him to guide the global Church and to help build lasting bridges of peace in Assisi.

A first encounter with Asia and with Mary

In December of 1959, I arrived in Singapore after three weeks at sea. As a young missionary assigned to Asia, my mind drifted back in time. I thought of Saint Francis Xavier, the patron saint of missions. More than four centuries earlier, he landed in these regions and pioneered new ways and methods in the heart of Asia.

That same evening, I went to the Shrine of Mary, located on the hill overlooking the city. I was incredibly surprised to realize that there were not just Catholics among the many pilgrims. There were also Protestants, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. Everyone went to Mary to trust her with their sorrows, to ask for grace, to say a prayer, or to find a bit of peace. My first encounter with Asia taught me that Mary is the Mother of all humanity, not just Christians.

Mission and charity in the face of a constant question

I remember my experience as a young missionary when we visited animist villages to announce the Good News. Upon arriving in a village, we started by visiting the sick to give them some medicine. Only in the

evening, when everyone returned from working in the fields, did we speak to them about religion. Many times, what made the biggest impact was not the teaching but the attention and care for those who were suffering. Simple and authentic charity is often the sign that opens the heart to the Word, even when that Word is expressed in ways that are inadequate or not well adapted.

From the beginning, I asked myself a question that I often shared with my brothers. I wondered why the Church was absent from the Buddhist world. I considered what we could do for the Buddhists, who are the country's majority and culture's leaders. I asked myself how to announce the Gospel to them. I appreciated my brothers' work with the responsive ethnic minorities, but I had to help the Lao-Buddhists.

Learning from the inside to better announce the Word

With the support of my superiors, I sought to know and approach Buddhism in its various expressions. From my second year on, I dedicated two or three hours every day to meeting with Buddhist followers, including monks and regular devotees or ordinary people. I took notes on everything. Over the course of five years, I wrote nearly 10,000 cards describing the practical application of Buddhism in the country.

Under the impulse of Vatican II and the systematic study of Buddhism, I discovered that a different type of mission was necessary in a Buddhist environment. Our presence had to be different in its methods and its goals. To learn their culture and values, we had to be with them. The goal was to be a leaven for others, helping them grow and flourish from the inside. From that perspective, I started the Center for Research and Dialogue with Buddhists on behalf of the Bishops Conference of Laos and Cambodia.

Fabio CIARDI, OMI

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**With heavy hearts, we honor and celebrate
the lives of the following departed Oblates:
May their souls find eternal peace,
and may their lives and devotion to service continue to inspire us all.**

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