

Mario Borzaga, O.M.I.

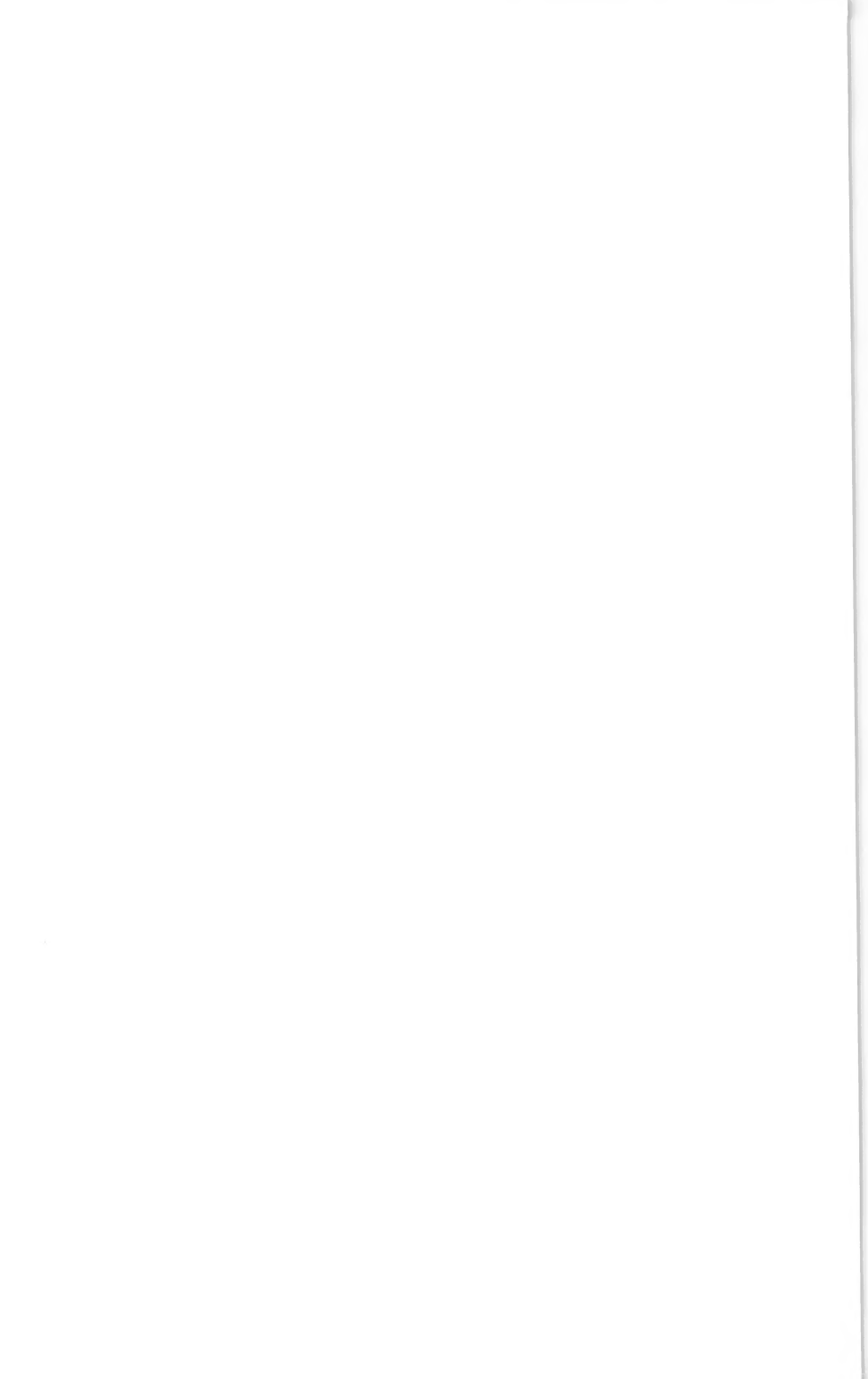
1932 - 1960

LUCIA BORZAGA



 OBLATE
HERITAGE

4



“To be a Happy Man”

Mario Borzaga, O.M.I.

1932-1960

Lucia Borzaga

4

Oblate Heritage Series
Oblate General Postulation
Rome, Italy
1992

Note: Lucia Borzaga, the author of this biography, is the sister of Fr. Mario Borzaga, O.M.I. She is a member of the Secular Institute of the Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (O.M.M.I.), founded on July 2, 1952 by Fr. Louis-Marie Parent, O.M.I.

Cover Portrait by: Br. Kingsley Cooray, O.M.I.

Translation by: Fr. Peter Galloway, O.M.I.

Printed by: Marian Press Ltd.,
Battleford, SK, Canada

Mario Borzaga, O.M.I.

1932-1960

“Fr. Mario Borzaga was born at Trent in 1932. No official information is available concerning his childhood. He left the Seminary for the Novitiate in 1952, and was ordained to the Priesthood in 1957. He plays the piano, preferring Chopin, Bach, Grieg, Dvorak, together with other minor composers. He smokes only ‘Aurora’. He lived at Trent at No. 18 Via Gorizia. He is alive.” Thus, in a light-hearted way, did Mario Borzaga write his own biography. However, the details of his life are available and the memory of that life lives on in a unique way.

A Fragile Beginning

Mario was born on a splendid August evening at the end of 1932, in the green suburbs of the city of Trent. Immediately at his birth there was an emergency with his health. His mother would later say, “While I was carrying him, my mother was incurably ill. My baby, who had yet to see the light of day, also felt my suffering. All the same, I thought of it with joy. Thanks to the good Lord, he was born — but I was ill. That night I thought I would die.” Mario’s father faced the moment with fortitude, and mother and child were saved. The first months were distressing — Mario cried continuously. His parents believed in their hearts that the baby would never be entirely normal. They didn’t love him the less for that, instead they gave him a special place in their hearts. Mario’s brothers Fabio and Emilio had to be moved away for a short time, so that Mario could have special care. But he improved and soon the family was able to come back together again. However, Mario was always to be delicate and susceptible to illness.

His mother tells of another early bout of illness. “When he was two and a half, he was seriously ill with bronchial pneumonia. Twice daily the doctor would come to the house to attend

Growing
Years:
“Always
Full of
Sky”

to him, but offered little hope. We were dismayed when the doctor told us, ‘Think of him as an Angel in Paradise.’ I watched over him day and night, and prayed to Our Lady Help of Christians and St. John Bosco. On the seventh night there was not a sign of life from him.” But the mother’s prayer prevailed, and Mario lived.

While he was still very small, he showed his love for heights, for cycling, for long explorative expeditions. The surrounding hills held no secrets for him, and the tops of the trees in the garden became his favourite refuge. Balanced crosswise on his father’s bicycle, he would speed through the city’s streets. He participated with his brothers and the other neighbourhood children, as well as those of the parish youth centre in all the games. By this time, his life was a succession of exploration and conquest.

Mario always remembered very well: “. . . my first day at school, in that far-off October of 1938, at the Francesco Crispi School in Via San Bernardino. I was six years old, dressed in a white shirt with glass buttons and black shorts. My teacher was called Tommasini. From that day, the months, the years, passed by like mountain streams.” His relationship with his first teacher was one of continuous and reciprocal misunderstanding, but from his second until his fifth years of elementary school there were no more problems. Mr. Gilmozzi, a first class teacher and pedagogue, immediately took



The Borzaga Boys - 1935
Emilio, Fabio, Mario

note of the intelligent creativity of his little student with his fanciful whims which distracted him easily from his tasks, like the flight of a swallow or “*the schoolroom window, always full of sky.*” In those first years of school, there was no shortage of time for playing, and Mario was always to be found with his brothers and many of the children who lived nearby.

The youth centre of the parish proved to be the forge of a deep religiosity, but also of hobbies and pastimes like competitions or theatre, and had its own importance in Mario’s childhood. At six he was already an altar server, always trailing his brothers, proudly wearing the white tunic of St. Tarcisius, the child martyr. As a new priest he would write, “*I celebrated at the altar where I had served hundreds of Masses, in the church of the Bertonian Fathers.*”

Mario’s two elder brothers, Emilio and Fabio, were his close companions, but in time there arrived a little sister. Mario soon became infatuated with her, and won her heart. She would turn out to be his closest companion for his games and expeditions.

Their father trusted his three sons with definite tasks in the house and in the garden, and even at that time Mario showed that he had little propensity for manual labour, something which became a frequent topic for family jokes. Life was never monotonous in their home; it was always a hive of various activities, thanks to the golden hands of the father, Costante, and the mother, Ida, who were able to set themselves to practically anything. And the children took after their parents. His father worked as a master carpenter in a Catholic school where in addition to seeing to the smooth running of the workshop, he was also responsible for teaching the art of woodwork to deaf children.

Above all there was no lack of prayer, nor of the “spirit” of prayer in the family. The evening Rosary was a fixed part of the routine. The father would kneel first, even when tired after a long day of work, and the family would join him in prayer to Mary.

War Time:
First
Com-
munion:
“The
Greatness
of Grace”

This was a difficult period in Italy, since the fascist government was in the process of imposing itself. Mario in his own way contested them. At the compulsory marches of the Fascist childrens' movement, the Balilla, he always contrived to arrive with something in disorder. Then, once thrown out, he would be found blissfully watching the march from a distance.

In 1940 the war came to Italy. But cold and hunger had for some time already made themselves felt. Mother's dexterous hands were able to work miracles to supplement father's pay. Nevertheless, the family's way of life was cut to the bone. Mother, a first-rate seamstress, would restore used clothes. Mario always had to suffer his brothers' hand-me-downs. Trent became the scene of continuous air raids and the family had to take refuge in the air-raid shelters. On the 14th of March of that year, Mario received his First Communion. *“It was an uncertain March day, cloudless yet sunless: crowded in our hundreds in the great Cathedral we went to receive Jesus into our childrens' hearts. The Greatness of Grace! Jesus said next to nothing to me, yet how many of those boys were chosen like me to be priests and missionaries? I don't wish to know so as not to be frightened. The leader of our children's group gave me a holy card which I have kept till this day. Now many years have passed, and Jesus has come into my heart many times. At those moments he has spoken and has told me so many things that I have often been reduced to silence.”*

To Be a
Priest:
A Busy
Guardian
Angel

Thanks to his serving at the altar, to the spirit of prayer handed on by his parents, and to the life at the Oratory, there matured in Mario the desire to be a priest. Ever since he was four he had said this, and one of his many games consisted in transforming the kitchen table into an igloo under which, with his sister, he celebrated his own special liturgies.

When Mario made known this attraction to the priesthood his parents consulted his school teacher and the Rector of the Minor Seminary: they found themselves hesitating. Their

doubts were based both on his youth and on the difficult conditions of the war.

Again, it is his mother who recalls: "The child was prematurely aware of the priestly vocation, of the call of God. He had understood the good Master, but he still seemed too childish. He told me to ask for advice. So I spoke to the Rector of the Minor Seminary, Mons. Scalvini, and to my brother, Don Giulio."

Mario stayed in the Seminary for the Feast of



Entering the Minor Seminary - 1942
Fabio, Lucia, Emilio, Mario

St. Louis to assess his new environment. He returned home "happy and satisfied" — he had already made his choice: it was 1943, and he was just a few days over eleven. In 1956 he would write in his diary: *"If I am not mistaken, thirteen years ago, I was eleven, and entered the Seminary for the first time, at Drena. I believe that from that day my guardian angel would have had a lot to do. My mother — who was still in pain because of an operation on her hand — trusted me for the trip to a man going to the same place. An hour into the trip he left me alone, but I didn't cry. A lady, who saw me struggling by, overburdened with my belongings, stopped me and told me to make myself at home on her pile of baggage. Then some angel guided me in the darkness right to the Seminary, one of the greatest graces of my life."* So he himself recalls his entry into the Seminary, far from home, evacuated to a little village lost in the mountains, because of the constant danger from the relentless bombardment in the city.

Each day Mario wrote a postcard to his mother; the few words were addressed to everyone in the family. He felt very

homesick. The privations were too many to be counted — the cold, the hunger, and all sorts of dangers in wait for the unwary.

At the end of the first scholastic year there, Mario went to join his mother, Emilio and Lucia at Prè in the Ledro Valley, where they had been forced to take refuge with an uncle due to the massive bombardment of city on the 13th of May 1944.

On the 11th of November of that year he returned to the Seminary, at Roncone, in Giudicarie. This time his mother accompanied him, and it was with a heavy heart that they parted, after a long hug and many tears. And to this was added his very real sadness at the absence of his father, whom he had not seen for more than a year. Between Mario and his father there existed a tacit understanding, a sense of deep communion, based on love and mutual esteem. His father, always a man of faith and prayer, was very proud of him, and infinitely grateful to the Lord for having him honoured him to the point of having chosen one of his sons to be a priest.

On the 25th of April 1945 the Second World War came to an end. “Once the danger was over,” said the Mother, “we returned home thanking the Lord from the bottom of our hearts.”

In autumn Mario went back to the Seminary, at Trent, to continue his secondary education. His mother said, “Happy as he was to be close to his own family, we were able to be together often, to talk about everything — he was always delighted to keep up with what was going on in the family.”

The formators were committed men and were unusually competent in the human and spiritual formation of the future priests. Mario would never forget the Rector of the Seminary as a man who knew how to love, and the spiritual director, whom he described as “a saintly priest”; so also the professors and their assistants. He felt loved by everyone, despite much evidence of misunderstanding thanks to his particular character which was at once shy, but imaginative and creative, leading him to lean much more to the arts than to practical matters. As

to studies there was no problem. He was sociable with his companions. Classical music attracted him ever more. Football, his bicycle, and long excursions into the mountains left no room for boredom. Nor did he neglect to refine his style of writing by means of carefully selected reading. Mario remembered those years as the happiest time of his life. *“The fourth year of high school even now remains one of the most joyful years of my life. I loved Jesus in the Sacraments and Mary, I prayed, I managed well at school, and I dreamed.”*

He passed at the high school with full marks . . . more or less! He failed the Greek exam. That morning the “Tour of Italy” bicycle race passed through the city, thanks to which the translation was done a little too hastily! After the supplementary exam, which he passed well without much study during the summer, the Greek textbook was flung aloft, to flutter in grand style atop the chimney pot.

He continued his secondary studies at the major Seminary. Now there was a change of formators and professors. Here he was even more at ease; he was with the same classmates who would become more than just companions, but also friends. More was demanded of him. But above the personal commitment to human and spiritual formation, it was a process of decision-making and continued discernment. Jesus who was his friend during his childhood forged in Mario a spirit of eucharistic contemplation. The Holy Mass in the morning prolonged itself during the course of the day in the form of his personal hour of adoration and in a long period of thanksgiving in which he persistently asked to be *“Priest, Apostle, Missionary . . .”*

On the 14th of November 1948 he received the cassock. His mother wrote, “On the eve of the clothing I took him all a Cleric needed, all made with my own hands. It seemed like carrying something precious, like a jewel, or even greater than that. On my return home I went into the Salesian Church, and prayed at length for his vocation, that the Lord should forever keep him as content and serene as he felt at that moment. Then

I bought a statue of Our Lady Help of Christians. The following day, in the Church of the Blessed Sacrament the Mass was celebrated with the ceremony of clothing. The clerics, more than thirty of them, filed in in procession, carrying over their arms the priestly vestments, with cotta and biretta.”

Mario set himself to his classical studies with enthusiasm. He began to write prose and poetry. During the holiday he translated works of Thomas Merton and recast them in verse. His climbs in the Dolomites became more important to him. The cycling expeditions emulated the climbs of the Tour of Italy. The piano became his favourite pastime. His days followed a strict rhythm, especially regarding prayer. In some small diaries he noted carefully suggestions, aspirations, and spiritual thoughts, and much space is given to his time before Jesus in the Eucharist. There emerged in him a special love for the Sacred Heart, and there slowly arose the desire for an apostolate in far-off cold lands, perhaps relating in some mysterious way to his childhood games, under the kitchen-table-cum-igloo. Some small magazines he found in the library told of certain missionaries who worked at the North Pole, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

The time arrived for the public examination. He passed brilliantly, but with the professor of philosophy, notorious as an avowed atheist, he tried to maintain a specifically Catholic position, and so he had to repeat the exam. In the autumn, on the advice of the Archbishop himself, he conceded the point to the professor, and was promoted at the highest level.

Maybe
an
Oblate?

Despite his disappointment in the philosophy exam, Mario on his return home found a wonderful gift — a piano, a gift from his mother. With her silent work as seamstress, she had put together the money necessary to buy a piano, one of the best German models. The house was immediately filled with waltzes, serenades, fugues, played pianissimo or fortissimo. There began some concert playing with his brothers Emilio on

the clarinet, and Fabio on the accordion. There was no shortage of basses and tenors — and . . . the mezzo soprano!

Mario wrote in one of his diaries: *“If I remember correctly, five years ago at Rovereto, I was doing my supplementary exam in philosophy; it’s an important enough date, because I remember that in the evening I drank a few too many glasses of wine, and so, having gone to bed at about eleven thirty with my temples hammering, my remorse for my excesses made me to promise to love Jesus with a ‘torrential’ love, and as a first act of reparation, the glimmerings of the idea to become an Oblate.”*

He submitted this thought to his spiritual director, who wisely recommended that he wait, since this could be a case of youthful enthusiasm. Mario obeyed, and prayed.

So he began his first year of theology. In his heart there grew ever stronger the desire to be Priest, Apostle, Missionary . . . in a total and unconditional gift of self.

His spiritual director, having ascertained the seriousness of his appeal, allowed him to leave. Mario confided his project to Emilio to sound him out, and to prepare the ground in his family so as to diminish the pain of parting. Soon, they would all know of his plans.

To his mother he confided, *“I feel that the Lord is calling me to labour in far away missions, beyond the sea, where there are so many souls who still don’t know God. In our own diocese there are already very many priests and religious.”*

A flying visit by Mario to the novitiate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, at Molise, confirmed his decision.

The day of his departure was fixed. They were all at the station for the farewell, comforted in their tears by the hope of a visit at the end of the novitiate.

On the morning of the 7th of November 1952 the train took him and, disappearing into the valley, bore him far away — far from his mountains and from the tenderness of home; far from

his beloved Seminary and the warm friendship of many companions; far too from the city of his birth and the region's teutonic culture.

Mario's heart was heavy at the parting. The initial impact of the novitiate was hard, everything seemed unpleasantly unfamiliar to him. Despite this he did not draw back, having himself chosen the Absolute. By degrees he settled into this new life, and he regained his equanimity. He wrote to his family, *"My nostalgia has passed and I am finally content: even the countryside which at first seemed so plain now seems more pleasing, sometimes I even find it beautiful and poetic."*

He began to correspond copiously. *"I must let you know that on the twentieth (of November), Thursday evening, I officially began the novitiate, proudly binding myself with the cincture of the Oblates. I am really happy with this step, and you?"* He light-heartedly assured his mother and father that *"The Superiors don't let us go short of anything."* And later, on the novitiate, he wrote, *"It's a year in which our potential for complete giving of self to the Lord is tested, a year which requires us to renounce, to empty ourselves completely of ourselves, as one would empty a bucket of rubbish, without regrets."*

With joy and pride he was able finally to announce to his family that on the 21st of November 1953 he would pronounce his vows, and he asked for their prayers.

At the end of the novitiate, Mario left Ripalimosani for San Giorgio Canavese (near Turin) to complete his theological studies, which he had begun at Trent. At the Scholasticate, the hours of study alternated with hours of manual labour — that blessed labour which he so detested.

In the autumn of 1956 Mario decided to begin the *"Diary of a Happy Man."** His diary was written closely, without correc-

* Part of this diary in the original Italian was published in 1985, entitled "Diario di un Uomo Felice." ("Diary of a Happy Man") This dealt in the main with his missionary experience in Laos. In 1986 other sections, covering his seminary years and his decision to become a missionary priest, were published with the title of "Verso la Felicità" ("Towards Happiness").

**“Jesus
Will
Transform
Me Completely...”**

tion or afterthought, in the certainty that no-one would ever read it. He wrote rapidly, about what happened during the day. Between the lines there emerges his whole personality. The shyness disappears and what bursts through the quickness of his pen is his romantic soul, ecstatic before the beauty of creation, without hiding his aversion for manual labour, his pain and suffering, his moods, his preferences. And, intimately part of the community as he was, he sculpts in a few words the figure of his companions and friends, of the professors and superiors, without ever permitting himself superfluous observations and rash judgements.

Mario clearly felt a “calling”, but also a choice, an election for a precise mission. *“He has chosen us, and not miracles, to extend his Kingdom”, and “perhaps one day I will be drowned in tears and in blood for the love of Christ.”*

The time for perpetual vows drew near. There was no hesitation or doubt or afterthought. Jesus, the friend of his infancy, was by now the Man of suffering, with whom he was able to relate in perfect harmony, through the consecration until death, affirming with confidence: *“I have understood my vocation: to be a happy man, even in the effort of identifying myself with the crucified Christ.”* And of the Lord he posed the question, *“How much pain remains, how much more night?”* On the vigil of the vows he wrote, as might be expected of him: *“I know exactly what death means, and I know that it is onerous, but if Life flows from death, I will die every day from dawn to dusk, drawing strength from the Bread who is the Victim, that is the Sacrament of Love, of Suffering, of the Will of the Father, and from that I will draw the strength to love, to suffer, to do the Will of the Father.”*

Of the taking of his vows, Mario wrote: *“At Communion I pronounced in a firm, clear voice my perpetual oblation, and I was amazed that I didn’t tremble at all, not even from the cold. Then Jesus came to me, bringing to me everything that a God-*

Victim of love might bring to a soul which was an object of his particular love."

He realized that the Lord was calling him to a total and unconditional gift, and to this he felt continuously attracted, noting, "Jesus will sooner or later call me to heroism." On the Feast of the Holy Innocents he wrote, "All the martyrs are innocent: if I wish to be innocent I must be a martyr, and the summit of innocence consists in allowing ourselves to die without argument."

The day of priestly Ordination was fast approaching. It is only necessary to see how much he wrote in his diary to appreciate the inner movements with which "the sentinel" awaited the dawning of that blessed day.

"The same Christ who has chosen me has given life and strength to the martyrs and the virgins: they were persons like me, fashioned from nothingness and weakness; they were chosen for the struggle, they were given the weapons, they struggled and won. I too have been chosen for martyrdom. And if I want to be a holy priest I must not wish for anything different, because this is the mystery which is in my hands daily — the mystery of the blood, of total immolation, of the complete gift of self, of the innocence which is the fruit of renunciation, of humility before the divine immensity. (I have great hopes of my priesthood through my soul, even more — there rests all my hope). I believe that Jesus will transform me completely and entirely: he would establish in me the reign of Love and of Sacrifice."

On his way to the priesthood Mary was by his side. "I am convinced that the Madonna has a prominent part in my Priesthood." "The Immaculate Conception will make my soul like hers, because in her there rests more easily the Heart of her Son Jesus."

“The Sacrifice of the Altar”

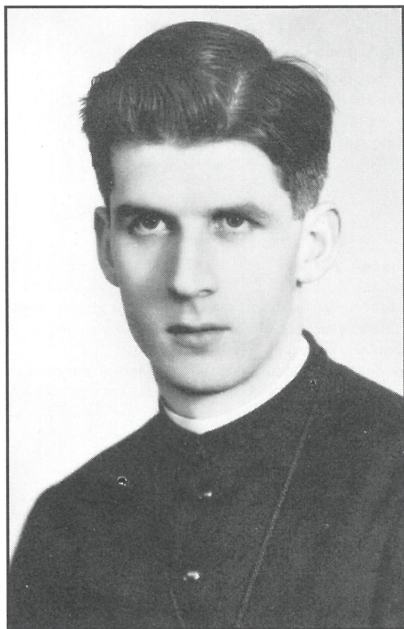
On the 24th of February 1957 he was ordained priest. “*Sacerdos in aeternum*,” “*alter Christus*.” The day was marked especially by the presence of many relatives: he felt deeply moved, surrounded as he was by the love of all his family and friends, especially of his mother and father.

The next day he celebrated his First Mass. Later, he would write:

“His Blood gushed from my hands onto the altar, and his Body was born as from the Virgin’s womb; as she was there too.” The few words convey clearly the almost symbiotic unity he felt with Christ’s immolation. It was a day of grace, and of conversion. *“This morning I had thought of asking of Christ, born through me, the grace of a sure martyrdom, of the apostolate, of preaching, and of a fruitful ministry. Instead I asked to observe always*

to perfection the Rule of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. This grace has been granted from today — what was required was the Sacrifice of the altar.”

For all that, his deep love of Christ extended also to great love for his brothers. This he explained, saying, “*. . . to want to be at the disposition of one’s brothers so as to serve Jesus in them, one might at least give of one’s time. One who must love is beyond time. My time is God’s, and what belongs to God belongs to everyone.*”



Priesthood 1957



September 1957 Family home, Trent
Last visit to family before
leaving for Laos

On the 28th of April he celebrated High Mass in the Cathedral in his home city. It was an occasion which allowed him to meet again his friends, his companions from the Seminary, his relatives, and especially his loved ones. Together with them and the beloved piano the evening grew long, resounding with song.

When he was asked to express his desire for a future mission, Mario wavered, asking himself what the Lord wanted of him. He finally decided to volunteer for the Laos mission, and accordingly made his request of Father General. The request was granted, he was to leave in autumn together with five other Oblates.

On the 25th of July he returned to spend time with his family in Trent, where he would remain until his departure for the mission. But his beloved home was no longer his true

dwelling place. *"My home is the place of crying, of suffering, of sweating for the love of Jesus."*

Laos:
"All Are
Entrusted
to My
Sanctity"

Mario departed from Naples for Laos, a poor Oriental country, in the company of five confreres. The parting was painful, but his enthusiasm for the new mission helped him to overcome all obstacles. There awaited them a month of travel by sea and land before arriving at their destination, Paksane, a small city in central Laos. He didn't hide the force of the initial impact — as he came *"face to face with the brutal reality which awaited him"* he was discouraged. Together with his companions, he immediately began the studies of the pastoral year; above all he threw himself into the study of Laotian. Knapsack

on his back, by foot or on his bicycle, he began to visit the closest villages. With his habitual generosity he was always ready to lend a strong hand in the manual labour, which was never easy for him, also because he was pained to note that he *"had to do something of everything besides priestly ministry."* He assumed the responsibility of official correspondent with their Italian friends. His personal correspondence was as intense as usual, and it was with joy that he gave and received news.

In May, since he was already managing the Laotian language quite well, he began some apostolic work in the mountainous region of Phon Hom and Pak Kadine. He felt a deep sense of responsibility for the work given to him: *"All these brethren are entrusted to my sanctity, to my fervour."*

The days passed quickly: *"from altar to study, from Cross to joy, there was nothing else in my day. I will never tire of following Jesus since he pursues me with his Grace, which is Love, which is Life."* His longing for martyrdom was still present, but no longer a martyrdom in blood: *"Oh martyrs everywhere, give me of your love, or nothing. The problem is that I am much more inclined to martyr Love than to be a martyr for Love."*



Laos - 1960
A missionary at his desk

In July, Mario left Paksane and climbed into the Keng Sadok mountains. For him there had arrived *“the time to leave. To go alone with God, to go alone by ways I have dreamt about, ways known to no-one, neglected in ages past, towards those sons of God in need of Light and a Flame to warm their short lives and illuminate the short journey.”* And he repeated to himself, *“it won’t be enough to give medicine, you must give Life — that sublime Life which you are called to live so that others don’t die. It will be just as difficult and painful as giving birth, it is the mystery of suffering.”*

Mario knew moments of great solitude, of aridity, of fear; he knew the Dark Night. A sense of repulsion for everything and everyone was very strong. He himself affirmed, *“My cross is to detest bitterly those whom I ought to love, the Laotians, yet it is for them I must give my whole life. My cross is the language which I don’t manage to learn. My cross is me, cross to myself.”* There followed moments of desperation. The day of his twenty-sixth birthday he asked himself yet again, *“How many years remain of the journey? Sentinel, how much more night remains?”*

He got an obedience for a new post: on the feast of the Immaculate Conception he would be at Kiucatian, a village lost in the mountains to the north of the country. With enthusiasm he set out again, on a new journey to his flock. Since he already had a good knowledge of Laotian, he began to study Hmong. And in between he organized the catechesis and administered the sacraments. Having rediscovered his accordion, he sent the people into raptures with his joyful music. By Christmas he had already been given a local name by the new faithful — a sign of acceptance. There was no shortage of sickness, a source of great fear, and Mario had little medical knowledge, but he did what he could for the people.



Laos - 1960 Healing the body too

He was assailed by doubts that Laos was not the right place for him, he was afraid that his character was not what was required for the missionary apostolate — too shy, too insecure, afraid of everything including his own shadow. His slowness in learning the languages of the place made him think himself lazy, distracted and fickle. Even so, he knew at the same time that he would never ask to return home.

On Good Friday of 1959 he was assailed yet again by fears, *“of death, of going mad, of being abandoned by God. I breathe with difficulty, I feel jittery, but it’s nothing,”* he said, *“Jesus loves me all the same, and I love him.”*

In May he went up to Long Vai. He knew Laotian well and was capable of meaningful encounter with the Christians and catechumens of the area. The trip was very tiring. The situation was made worse by the presence of Pathet-Lao soldiers who had installed themselves in that locality. The month was a succession of travel, of catechesis, of taking flight from the soldiers. But in his diary he noted: *“No longer is it a matter of meditating, even less of writing down the meditation, but simply of living it.”* He asked of the Father *“bread for the journey”* and of Mary, *“the way, and something soft to bind my weakness.”*

“Jesus Is So Close”

Then, almost unexpectedly, his love for his people burst forth. At the end of the year the whole village of Kiucatan and the vast surrounding area was entrusted to him. He noted in his diary, *“Now I am alone with God, and Jesus is so close that I don’t for a moment dream of fear.”* Christmas was approaching: *“Jesus is born in our hearts in the midst of so much poverty, so much silence, and in the absence of every semblance of external appearance. Only faith recognizes Him. It truly is Christmas”* he wrote joyfully, *“Even the Pouteung people are finally very agreeable.”* And enthusiastically he began to study their language.

The year of 1960 began with more months of hard work. Thanks to the baptisms, he had the comfort of seeing the Christian community of Kiucatan growing, and the villages scattered through the mountains were truly a source of great hope. Mario gave special attention to the catechesis of the new Christians and the catechumens, and he was always ready to meet with new communities in the process of being formed. But there was the ever present threat of the Pathet-Lao; the danger of ambush lay in every mountain track, and occasionally he had to go into hiding in order to save himself.



Laos - 1960 The people of the parish

**“To Die
Without
Argu-
ment”**

In mid-April, he was insistently called to a village to visit the sick. The times and the place were dangerous, but Mario, priest, apostle, missionary, knew that he and his special ministry were wanted. Knapsack on his back, in the company of the catechist Shiong, he departed at his mountaineers pace. He greeted a confrere saying, *“I’ll be back in two weeks! See you at Luang Prapang!”*

They would wait long for him, in vain. The first searches began. All the paths which he had taken were explored, without result. Mario and Shiong had reached their destination, they had visited the sick, ministered the sacraments, and departed. After that, nothing.

In Italy, in the city of Trent, they were longing for a letter “as long as a train” from him. In May, a dry radio announcement communicated that a missionary, Fr. Mario Borzaga, Oblate of Mary Immaculate, was lost in Laos.

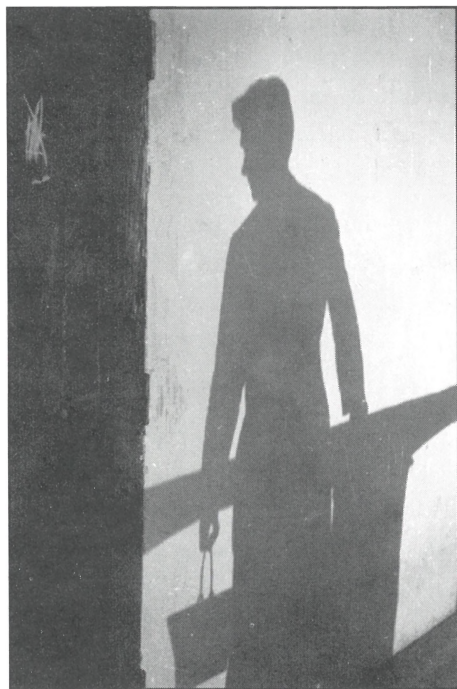
**“We Are
Always
Ready”**

On the eve of his consecration into the family of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Mario wrote repeatedly in his diary: *“we are always ready, Lord at all times, to be butchered, considered as slaughter lambs.”*

That time had arrived for Mario: already he had been consumed day after day in the silent martyrdom of the heart, in the dark night of the senses, giving himself unconditionally to those around him, without ever stinting of his time. He had also said that he had *“received Blood”*, and blood must give; *“received Love”*, and love must give, so as not to become a parasite of the altar. He felt himself called to martyrdom and often repeated that his journey was *“towards immolation.”*

In that April of 1960, Mario stepped for the last time into the dense forest. That route would be the furrow for the grain of wheat which had to die, and be transformed into good bread for distribution to the people.

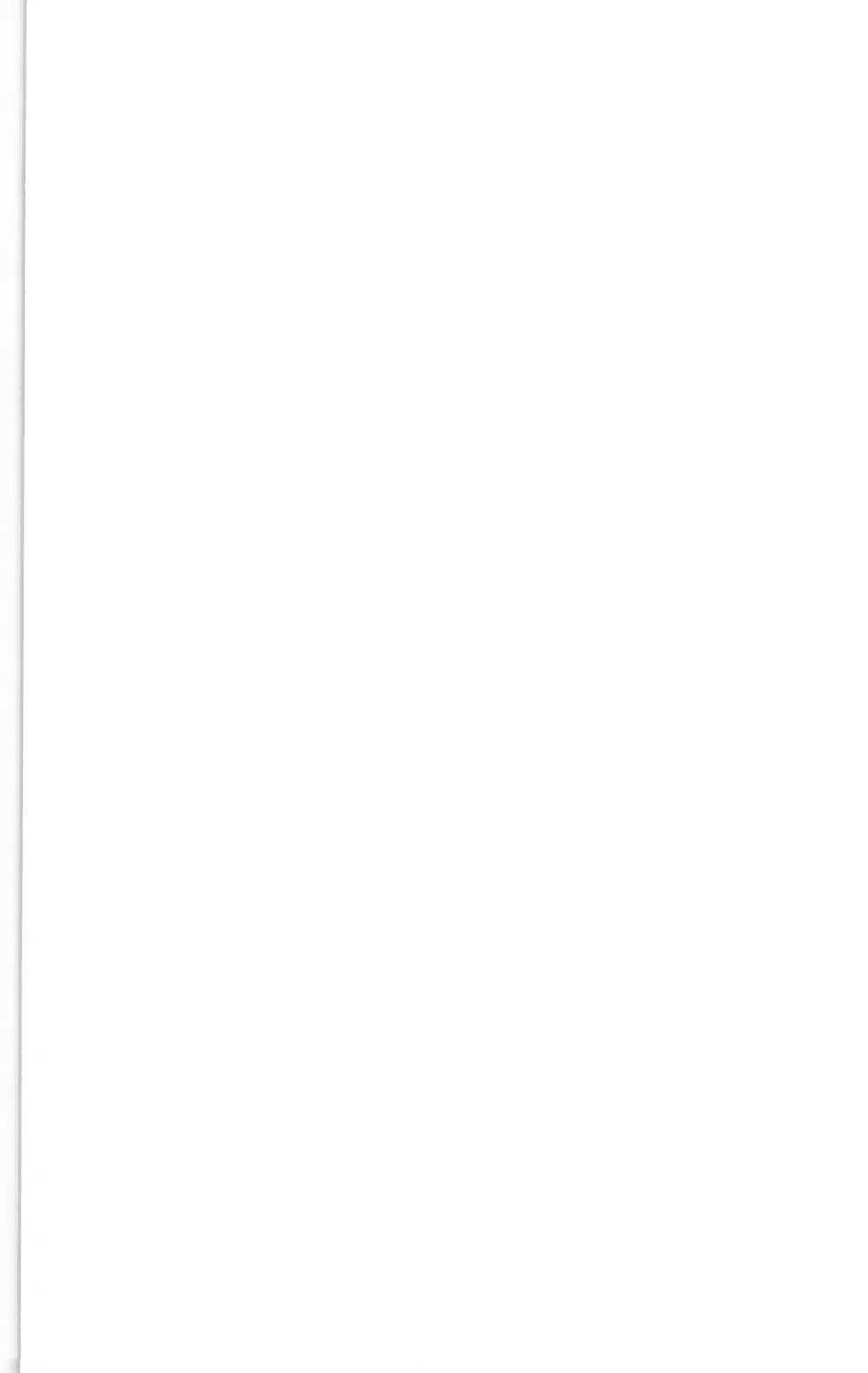
Mario's last liturgy was celebrated in silence. For years he prayed after Communion to be "*priest, apostle, missionary, martyr.*" The Lord granted this wish in his very short life. His mysterious death is given to us so that we may perceive God at work in His call and see Mario Borzaga's unconditional response. It was a happy coming together.

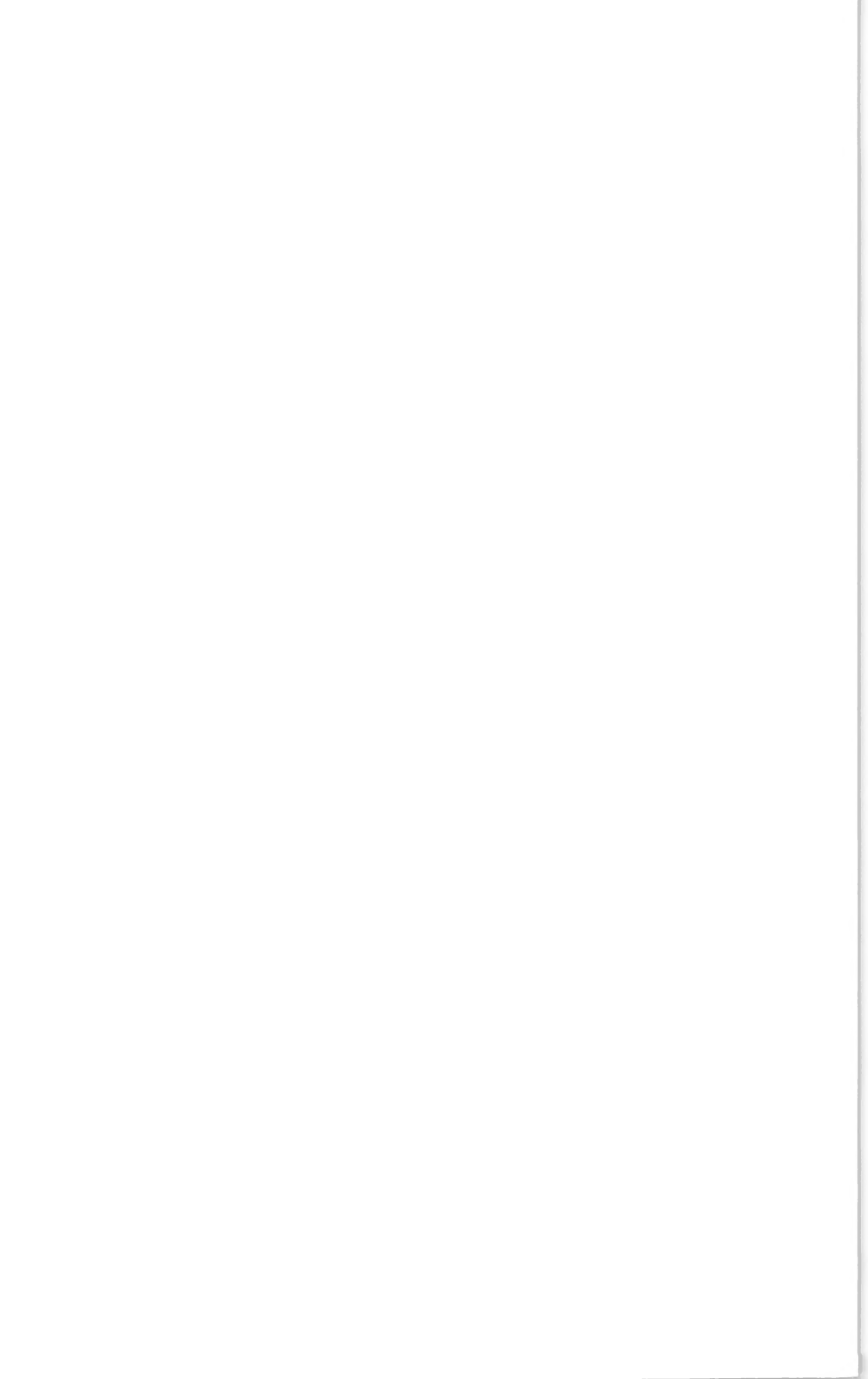


Mario Borzaga, O.M.I.

1932 - 1960

Then the shadow, now the substance





OBLATE HERITAGE SERIES

1992

1. *"One of Our Own"*
Archbishop E. 'Mabathoana, O.M.I., 1904 - 1966
First Oblate Mosotho Priest and Bishop in Lesotho
2. *"A Way of the Cross in the 20th Century"*
Fr. Friedrich Lorenz, O.M.I., 1897 - 1944
A German Oblate tried and beheaded by the Nazis
3. *"The Mad Monk of Tholagatty"*
Fr. B. A. Thomas, O.M.I., 1886 - 1964
Founder of the Rosarian Congregations in Sri Lanka
4. *"To Be a Happy Man"*
Fr. Mario Borzaga, O.M.I., 1932 - 1960
An Italian Missionary who disappeared in Laos
5. *"Brother Church"*
Br. Ernest Gauthier, O.M.I., 1908 - 1983
Devoted doorkeeper at the University Seminary,
Ottawa
6. *"If Only for an Hour"*
Fr. Ludwik Wrodarczyk, O.M.I., 1907 - 1943
A young Polish priest cruelly put to death

**Oblate General Postulation
C.P. 9061
00100 Roma Aurelio
Italy**