



SOCIETÀ DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES

CASA GENERALIZIA SALESIANA

Via della Pisana 1111 - 00163 Roma

*Il Rettor Maggiore*

Prot. 17/0044

**Letter of the Rector Major, Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, on the occasion of the Venerability of the Servants of God Fr. Francesco Convertini, Salesian missionary in India, and Fr. Josè Vech Vandor, Salesian missionary in Cuba.**

My dear Salesian Confrères,

My dear brothers and sisters of the Salesian Family,

On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the Holy Father Pope Francis authorized the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to promulgate the decrees concerning:

- the heroic virtues of the Servant of God **Francesco Convertini**, Priest professed of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, born on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1898, and deceased on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1976, in Krishnagar (India).

- the heroic virtues of the Servant of God **José Vech Vandor**, Priest professed of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, born on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1909, in Dorog (Hungary) and deceased on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1979, in Santa Clara (Cuba).

They are a new gift to our Family and a confirmation of the path of sanctity flourished from the charism given by God to the Church through our father Don Bosco.

**Venerable Francesco Convertini** was born in quarter Papariello of Locorotondo (Bari) on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1898. During WWI he was called to arms. He was wounded, taken prisoner and brought to Poland. On his return to his homeland, he says "yes" to the call of the Lord that became manifest through the mediation of Fr. Angelo Amadei, biographer of don Bosco, and the Community of "Cagliero" in Ivrea. He leaves from Genoa to India, after receiving the Crucifix from the hands of Blessed Fr. Rinaldi. He is a novice of Venerable Stefano Ferrando, disciple of Msgr. Luigi Mathias and of the Servant of God Fr. Costantino Vendrame, and he distinguishes himself for his exceptional apostolic zeal. His mission field was Bengal, where nobody like him had so many friends, so many spiritual sons and daughters among ignorant and wise, rich and poor. He was the only missionary who could enter into a house of Hindus or Muslims. He was continually on the move from village to village. His means of transportation were the horse and the bicycle. But he preferred to put his rucksack on his back and walk on foot, because in this way he could meet many people and speak to them of Jesus.



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He donated himself without distinction to all: Muslims, Hindus, Christians... and he was loved and venerated by all as a Master of interior life for the “sapientia cordis” (the wisdom of his heart) which he possessed abundantly. He, who was a loving devotee of the Virgin, died on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1976, whispering: “Mother of mine, I never displeased you in my lifetime. And now, you help me!”

The life of Fr. Convertini is rich of heroic expressions linked to his charity, his penances and his charm as a man of God who brought “the water of Jesus who saves”. He conferred Baptisms by the thousands. He deprived himself of everything to donate to the poor: his very clothes, shoes, bed, and food. He always slept on the ground. He fasted at length. He was poor to an incredible degree. There are so many episodes, enriched also by supernatural gifts, which gained him a fame of sanctity even during his lifetime. He belonged to all without any distinction of religion, caste or social condition. He was loved by all. Fr. Francesco Convertini is undoubtedly a model of Salesian missionary life, an example of true enculturation of the Gospel, a master of interior life and of exceptional self-denial in a pastoral key, one who made of his own life an adventure in the Spirit with the apostolic heart of Don Bosco.

**Venerable José Vech Vandor** was born on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1909, in Dorog (Hungary) to a family of farmers. Upon the advice of a Franciscan Father, when he was 16 years old he asked to enter as aspirant in the Salesian College of Peliföldszentkereszt. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1927, he became a novice and on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1928, he did his first profession. After pronouncing his perpetual vows, he left Hungary and went to Italy where he commenced his theological studies at the Salesian Pontifical University in Turin-Crocetta. Before leaving for Italy, Jozef Wech changed his name from “Wech” to “Vandor”, which in Hungarian means “pilgrim”. This name however proved prophetic: for many years, his life would have been a continuous peregrinating journey, marked by stages, stops and new starts. On July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1936, he was ordained a priest and soon afterwards he was destined to the apostolic work in the Greater Antilles.

From 1936 to 1979 the life of Fr. Vandor was characterized by continuous movements: Guanabacoa, Moca, Matanzas, Camagüey were the places where he exerted his ministry in the midst of trials and hardships. From 1954 to the end of his life he lived in the city of Santa Clara in Cuba. He was sent to this locality with the task of devoting himself to the pastoral care of the church of “Nuestra Señora del Carmen” and to the construction of the “Colegio de Artes y Oficios Rosa Pérez Velasio”. He, a Hungarian, proved he was able to understand the Cuban people, sharing their hopes, their fears, their expectations. He was a “messenger of truth and hope” and a worker for peace. In fact, in 1958, during the famous battle of Santa Clara, the extreme military appendage of the Cuban revolution, the Venerable endangered his own life as a mediator, to negotiate a truce. In those difficult days he saved many lives.



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On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1978, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his religious profession was celebrated in the presence of the Rector Major, Fr. Egidio Viganò. Fr. Vandor was by now renowned all over the city as a peacemaker, an exemplary priest, a man of profound union with God, a very sought-after spiritual director. He showed to be a true parish priest with the heart of the Good Shepherd, with the style of the preventive system of St. John Bosco. Since 1961 the Servant of God was struck by various diseases that he accepted with a great spirit of abandonment to and conformity with the will of God. He died on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1979.

Doing good and working for the salvation of souls was his only concern during the 43 years of work in Cuban soil. His personality, his spirituality, his pastoral creativity left profound signs in the diocese of Santa Clara. Fr. Vandor can be approached to St. Francis de Sales for his patient docility, his prudent commitment, his illumined wisdom in spiritual direction; he can also be approached to St. John Bosco for his apostolic dynamism, his love for the poorest, his spirit of faith, his serene cheerfulness and his cordial manners.

In this year in which, through the Strenna, I invite to a special educative and pastoral attention to the family, I like to recall how Fr. Convertini came from a family marked by bereavements and hardships. His father died when Francesco was less than three months old. His mother was a woman of profound Christian faith, entirely dedicated to the family. To Francesco who helped in the fields, watched the turkeys or did some other chores fit for his young age, she used to repeat: "Put love! Put love!" In the evening the family gathered to pray the Rosary. Death once again visited Francesco's home who, when he was 11 years, in 1909, lost also his mother who died in childbirth. Soon afterwards, with his brother Samuele, he was taken to the fair where children were hired as shepherd boys. Their masters were good and very believing people and got to love the two orphans who, in their turn, called them mom and dad. This family story marked the missionary style of Fr. Convertini who in his missionary work evangelized visiting the homes of the people, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus and Atheists, to speak to them of God in a comprehensible way and trying to bring to their families a message of peace and reconciliation. Because of his transparency and simplicity of life, homes opened to him and he was welcomed also by Hindus and Muslims as a man of God.

Also Fr. Vandor, born to and brought up in a Christian and hard-working family, always had a special attention to the families, above all during the years when he was parish priest in Santa Clara (Cuba), dedicating his energies to the formation and accompaniment of the families, trying to work for peace and reconciliation in a social and moral context marked by poverty, abandonment of the faith, because of the political changes that had taken place and the difficulties for the Church in doing her own pastoral mission.



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These two Venerable priests remind the entire Salesian Family that today the family represents a great frontier of our pastoral and educative mission. Devoting ourselves to encountering, accompanying, sustaining the families especially in such a complex context as the one we are living in, is to us a great challenge. Besides, their witness of missionaries in difficult times and lands, Bengal for Fr. Convertini and Cuba for Fr. Vandor, calls us one more to the missionary attention we must reserve to the family, especially in the transmission of life, of values and of faith, because only in this way «one generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts » (Psalm 145:4).

Finally, I wish to entrust once more our Salesian Family to Mary Help of Christians, of whom Venerable Convertini and Vandor were devout sons. I wish you may really draw inspiration from these examples of Salesian sanctity, knowing their witness and asking through their intercession the grace of the miracle that opens up the way to their beatification.

Rome, 24 January 2017  
Feast of Saint Francis de Sales



**D. Ángel Fernández A., SDB**  
Rector Major