

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1983)
Heft: 1806

Artikel: A farewell to and from the Swiss Catholic Mission [to be continued]
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689890>

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A farewell to and from the Swiss Catholic Mission



ON the occasion of the last annual general meeting, on June 29, 1983, the Committee of Swiss Catholics in London, not without regrets, accepted the decision of the Swiss Bishops' Conference to close down the Swiss Catholic Mission.

The changed times made this unavoidable. A mission is for a special task and once that is accomplished, it is over.

The committee was dissolved and the Chaplain, Fr. Paul Bossard, was authorised to take charge of all its remaining responsibilities and take the necessary steps involved in its dissolution, with due regard for all invested interests.

THIS short official statement may hit us like an arrow hitting its target. The power and the strength of such an impact comes from the bow stretched by the strong arm of the Mighty Archer.

Before the books are closed and hidden in the archives let us spare a little time to look again at the power and the strength of the great devotion which has sent this mission through its troubled 40 years.

Hard work has been done by many people, especially the founders, and great endurance was involved. We must not forget them or its source of Divine Origin, the Holy Spirit.

Attilio Lanfranchi (1936-1958)

Old England as a mighty power ruling the world, has gained experience in dealing with foreigners and in keeping them at bay. But when power begins to crumble the masters have to learn that everybody rises and wants to take his share.

This is in short the background

of Fr Attilio Lanfranchi's work in London. Following a call from the Westminster Diocesan Authorities for help in assisting foreigners with language problems, he came from Posciavo in 1936 to serve as multilingual priest in the Cathedral, especially in the confessional and for sickcalls.

His fluent command of Italian, French, German and English won him the admiration of his colleagues and his superiors. But they had considerable difficulties in appreciating his uncomplicated ease in dealing with people and his utter disregard for class-distinction and strict English ritual.

All the same, they tried their best to show forbearance, since, after all, he was a foreigner for foreigners. When war broke out and refugees and prisoners of war from various countries were numerous, he visited the camps, cared for their needs and was their friend.

Then came the bombs, and with many of his colleagues this

lean little priest climbed like a chamois over ruins, looking for survivors, never seeming tired.

The Swiss in London saw this and were aware that they had problems too. Why should their compatriot not look for them? In times of war people suddenly begin to think and seek help.

Colonel Bon, president of the Swiss Benevolent Society sat together with his colleagues J.J. Boos, A. Steinmann, J. Eusebio, C. Grob and others and formed a committee to ask the Cardinal Arthur Hinsley of Westminster to set Fr Lanfranchi free, so that he could serve the Swiss in their great pastoral need.

The Cardinal listened to the plea, understood that it made sense, but simply did not like the idea. As leader of the Catholic Church he strongly opposed little groups of national ghettos that had sprung up amongst Poles, French, Germans and Spaniards.

He had had to bow before the strong ones, but little Switzerland? Good heavens, no! Fr Lanfranchi did a good job in

Westminster, why lose him now during the war? We can get rid of him later once it's over!

But the Swiss were not so easily put off.

"Since we are a small country, have we no rights? Do our poor people, our sick and our dying have no right to do confession in their own language? Can you give us a priest who speaks German, French and Italian, the languages of our home? There are at least 2,000 in London!"

He had to agree, though with reluctance. So his assistants drew up the terms of reference for a Swiss Catholic Mission. Never should there be a Swiss Catholic Church in London. One "Eglise Suisse" for the Protestants is enough. Being only a "Mission" it can be dispensed with, once its task is fulfilled.

If we must do so, we will make Fr Lanfranchi their chaplain. He has no permanent contract and can be sent home whenever we wish, without giving a reason! Let us give the Swiss plenty of blessings – and keep them at bay.

On September 20 1942 on the National Day of Prayer, congratulations and blessings came from all sides.

The Swiss Catholic Mission was established with style and in the presence of Bishop Myers who had studied Swiss History and knew how to tickle the pride of Swiss.

Even the bishop of Chur joined the choir and blessed Fr Lanfranchi who had previously frustrated his last attempt to avoid such a decision by turning down his offer of a chair as professor in English at the high-school in Chur.

Finally, the Swiss Catholic Mission had become a fact, it had a title and a rubber stamp, a forceful committee and a devoted and original chaplain, but very little money. In a joint effort they all promised to solve this minor problem.

Fr Lanfranchi had a foretaste of the dynamics of a missionary life when he agreed to devote most of his time to his compatriots and had to move from his cosy room at Westminster Cathedral clergyhouse to the Tollington Park parish, which proved a great disappointment.

For 10 years he had to move

occasions, always starting from scratch.

Trying desperately to raise funds, the committee, under the leadership of Colonel Bon, worked hard to help their untiring chaplain and protect him from unfair criticism.

Through the minutes of their meetings we can see the hope and despair, small success and much frustration as well as grateful appreciation for help of the Swiss diplomatic delegation.

It was finally Minister M. de Torrenté who succeeded to penetrate the silence of ecclesiastic benevolence and

By Fr Paul Bossard

from place to place to find a parish priest – I counted seven different addresses in his circulars – who was prepared to give him accommodation for the work he was doing.

It was no easy task for him and for the Committee to find firm ground and a little bit of security.

After the war, young Swiss flocked by the hundreds and thousands to England to learn English, find a job or a new home, and he offered them a home from home with his "Edelweiss-Club" (1945) which later became the "Alpenrosen-Club" (1948).

A mixed choir met regularly for rehearsals and helped to give atmosphere and "Swisscolour" to his services and social gatherings.

And constantly he was on the move, to attend to the sick, the old and to those in despair. He searched out churches and church halls to gather his flock for religious services and for social

move the Cardinal, Bishop B.W. Griffin, from granting blessings to taking steps to change a critical situation.

Worried and overworked, the chaplain recovered in Switzerland from gastric ulcers. He was again offered a chair as English teacher this time at the college in Schwyz.

But he returned, moving into St. Ann's Church in Abbey Orchard Street, near Westminster Cathedral. With great delight the news was spread through the colony in circulars and through the *Swiss Observer*.

St Ann's was a cosy little church of the Irvingian Apostolic Pentecostals, built around 1880.

It was leased to Westminster Cathedral in 1922 due to lack of worshippers. It was of no great importance, had suffered damage in the war and had been neglected.

The Swiss of course, would prevent it from falling to pieces.

Above the vestry was a room, inhabited by mice and rats and birds. With a few hundred pounds it could be turned into a bedsitter. In those times such expenses used to cause headaches, but they were tolerated by the committee.

On his return the most urgent repairs were carried out. The chaplain had a permanent home, a little church and was appointed as its rector.

But there were strings attached. Never could he call it "Swiss Church" or conduct afternoon services for Swiss, except on special days like the first of August, "Bettag", Christmas and Easter, when Catholics could not fulfill their Sunday obligation. Holy Mass was still before midday only.

It was attended by the local neighbourhood, who were happy to have a priest again. And they made good use of him.

But happily he looked back over the first 10 years of the Swiss Catholic Mission and wrote in his report: "From a very few zealous Catholics at that time, we have nowadays about 600 families on our lists, without counting the four figure numbers of young people who come and go".

We know that statistics cannot give a true picture in the life of the Spirit, but they show that through the great effort made by people the Spirit can work.

A great dam needs strong walls to keep water in, to build up the pressure and then give the turbine the power. And a bow must be bent to the point of near breaking so that the arrow can hit

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its target. This is exactly what happened.

With new elan and effort the second decade of the Swiss Catholic Mission began on firm ground.

The most urgent repairs of the church were done, the organ was put in order and tuned and the choir flourished.

The nearby Catholic school in Great Peter Street offered its hall for the social gatherings of the "Alpenrosen club" on Sunday evenings. It attracted the young students and the ever increasing number of au-pair girls, keeping them in contact with the life of the church.

But with the church came also a community of local people who were happy to have a priest in their midst, and they needed time devoted to them. How could the chaplain cope with the additional parish, the young people and the repairs without neglecting the old and the sick Swiss all over London?

Everyone on the committee agreed that an assistant was badly needed. He would need accommodation, a housekeeper, long consultations and even more money.

Finally all work was done and the new flat neared completion. A second priest was coming to everybody's relief – but he had to go. He was dismissed by the

Cardinal after most careful consideration.

It was an accident with its subsequent court case and publicity, that had angered the chaplains superiors.

Why his car refused to obey that tired body with an empty stomach did not concern them.

He had had some drinks and that was it. The priest who came to help him in his work had to relieve him.

To the great distress of the committee and all his many friends he had to bid farewell in January, 1959. They all expressed their thanks and hoped that he would find on his return to Switzerland the reward his great merits and experience

deserved.

Again they were mistaken. In those times rewards were given for successful people – and he could show nothing.

He was sent to serve a colony of foreign workers, deep in the mountains where a huge dam was built for electric power.

There was rock and ice and little vegetation, and it was a five hour walk to the nearest village.

He died in 1969 of a broken heart?

This is, of course, how it looks from outside – there was more within: the secret of his strength, his friendship and deep humanity, a true follower of Christ – but it remains a secret.

To be continued.

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