

# Bishop of Parma, but Missionary to the World

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The hand of fate, or the inspiration of the Spirit was to again enter the life of Guido: in December of 1907, Guido became bishop of Parma, following the death of Bishop Magani. Bishop Conforti adopted In Omnibus Christi (Christ in all things) as his motto, and the Xaverians would later adopt it as well. It was to be put to practical application in his pastoral visits throughout the diocese. For almost 25 years he was the good shepherd of his flock, a living sign of the maternal concern that the Church shows towards all, whether they belong to the Church or otherwise, paying special attention to the poor and the weakest among them.

As with Ravenna, religious instruction was the priority of his pastoral agenda: he founded schools of Christian doctrine in all parishes and prepared catechists with appropriate courses in pedagogical and religious culture. He was the first in Italy to celebrate a catechetical week.

On five occasions Bishop Conforti carried out a full pastoral visit of his diocese, he celebrated two diocesan synods, and founded and promoted Catholic Action, giving special attention to the youth branch. He cultivated in a particular way the cultural preparation and holiness of his priests, the formation of lay people, catholic associations, a good quality press, popular missions, and Eucharistic, Marian and Missionary Congresses.

He brought about reconciliation where there was division, and strove to bring back to the fold those who had strayed. Moved by a deep and personal love, he instilled in people an attitude of respect for the Pope.

His presence in the most difficult moments in the history of Parma, though discrete and almost unnoticed, was resolute and effective, especially during the strikes in 1908 which were followed by the formation of a committee of lawyers for the defense of the rights of farmers and priests. The workers suffered low wages, long hours and atrocious and dangerous working conditions. He was known to support the workers because he saw that as his Christian duty in fighting for justice and social peace. At the same time he urged the wealthy to be more just in distributing their wealth.

Yet, he strongly opposed and condemned those who sought their end through violent acts. Conforti was never a spectator in these events that affected his brothers and sisters; he fought for the politics of the



Gospel that is an end to hatred, division and violence.

During the First World War Guido put all at his disposal to helping prisoners of war, children and families that had lost their bread winner, he visited the wounded, he comforted the bereaved, took care of those displaced by the war. He made sure that his seminarians, both diocesan and Xaverian helped in the hospitals that were erected. At the end of the War Bishop Conforti held a service of thanksgiving in the cathedral.

He also played an important part in the resistance to fascism put up by a part of the city. The fascist troops withdrew from Parma on the day after Bishop Conforti had offered to mediate in the conflict. As a result of this, the threat of a civil war was avoided.

A newly ordained priest, who sought the guidance of Bishop Conforti was Fr. Giuseppe Roncalli, in the future Pope John XXIII. “I sought the advice of Bishop Guido Maria Conforti — he once said — for he was the most illuminating bishop in Italy of that missionary movement, which had started after the encyclical of pope Benedict XV, ‘Maximum Illud.’ I sought Bishop Conforti for in him I found a person who brought together the sacred ministry of caring for souls found in bishops and missionaries: Bishop of Parma, but Missionary for the world.”

## The Love of God's People

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Bishop Conforti dedicated a lot of time in prayer, even though he was not a monk. In the serenity of that “*nest of eagles*,” as he used to call his community, and with the fresh air of his native Parma, he regained his strength. On September 16, 1907 Pope Pius X sent Conforti a letter, asking him to become collaborator of the dying bishop of Parma, Bishop Magani. The Pope began his letter with these words: “It’s two of us who are asking you this great favor, a service to be accepted at any cost and personal sacrifice.” It was a request from both the Pope and the Bishop of Parma, and Conforti accepted with the words “On the tomb of the Apostles, I now vow to die on the Cross.”



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Bishop Conforti arrives in Berceto in 1931 for a pastoral visit

Bishop Magani died soon after, and Conforti was a “missionary in his land,” ready to combat battles from many fronts. His heart was saddened by the departure of many priests of the diocese. There was social rebellion in Parma, with known anti-clericalism, which undermined the spiritual and social growth of the city and surrounding farming communities. Bishop Conforti found himself trying to fight religious ignorance and indifference, with a gentle yet firm hand. It was his first pastoral priority.

Once, during a pastoral visit, as he was having dinner with one of his priests, Bishop Conforti said to the priest: “Most Reverend Pastor, what a big difference between this table cloth and the altar cloth. And yet, on the altar we feed ourselves of the Body of Christ, while here we eat only earthly food!”

Because of his closeness to his priests and his people, because of his many confessions and homilies, and because of his many visits to the sick, the dying, and those in prison, Conforti’s fatherly love reached out to many. He told his secretary, as he was coming home from a mountain village: *“Every pastoral visit reminds me of being a missionary! How hard it is to be heading home!”*

In many occasions, Conforti would find a group of poor beggars on the steps of the Cathedral or in front of his house. It was the harsh reality of a city divided in two, by the river. Those who lived across the river were poor families, searching for their daily bread. And those on this side, affluent people, yet looking for their own good. There was a Franciscan friar, Fr. Lino, true man of charity, who encouraged the rich of the city for the need of change in their lifestyle, and to consider the plights of the poor in their city. They had become complacent in their ways, who thought of themselves as socially advanced, while forgetting that they were first of all Christians. It was the height of social hypocrisy, atheistic thought, social materialism, all of which created an abyss of insensitivity and mistrust among the people.

Urged by a true missionary spirit, Bishop Conforti tried to bring peace among them, and to bring the Gospel deeply in those fertile and generous souls. He used to say: *“They are not bad people, but ignorance abounds among them. We need to bring them a piece of bread wrapped in a page of the catechism.”* Bishop Conforti was a pioneer in teaching the Christian religion in a systematic way. He also thought about a liturgical reform, for he saw how his *“people are strangers to the Eucharistic Celebration.”*

Bishop Conforti wrote a vast archive of letters and documents during his years in Parma, which showed the wide scope of pastoral activities and the many relationships he established in different fields, with the sole purpose of extending the Reign of God. *“Faith has always been the norm of my life and thought. This faith, I have always desired to proclaim, the faith of the apostles, the faith of the Church.”*

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