

INTRODUCTION

A little more than a century ago, on 26th December 1907, our Friar Gabriele Maria Allegra was born in S. Giovanni La Punta in Sicily. We can call him “ours” despite all the years he spent far away on the other side of the world. He is “ours” because he is Sicilian and a Franciscan monk but, above all, because his humanity makes him close to us even if he lived for a long time in the Far East; he is close at hand despite the time which separates us from his life on earth. His humanity which brings him near to us, is based on the fact that, in spirit, he is essentially Sicilian and a Franciscan.

The education he received in his family who lived in the province of Catania at the beginning of the twentieth century to which he often refers, in his autobiography *Memoirs*, influenced his personality and his behaviour greatly. He was a simple man, but of vast culture; he was kind and considerate not only with his brother friars and superiors, but also with politicians and men of other religions and cultures. The Christian faith, transmitted to him naturally first by his family, found its maximum exaltation in the Franciscan spiritual life and world: the celebration of the paternity of God, who in Christ makes us all brothers among ourselves and with the most unfortunate, the farthest away.... to whom Friar Gabriele felt close.

In this issue of *Quaderni Biblioteca Balestrieri* we want to remember and testify to the closeness and relevance of Friar Allegra’s life and ideas by means of a collection of precious contributions from brother friars, colleagues and friends. Some of them have come from afar (one from Hong Kong and three from Jerusalem) and we have chosen them to underline the “catholicity” of Friar Allegra and his inborn ability to be close to everyone. The most important contributions include unpublished texts by Friar Allegra.

This monograph edition of *Quaderni Biblioteca Balestrieri* opens with a bio-bibliographical note by our editor, VINCENZO PISCOPO (*Contemplation, culture, announcing the word: the life of Father Gabriele M. Allegra*). This is essential because it offers the readers the way to understand the various contributions included in this issue, above all the two unpublished texts by Friar Allegra which have been edited by Goh and Orlando. These are followed by various studies of which the first one by Jossua takes us ideally to China. This can help us to discover the world in which Friar Allegra worked and lived. This issue also includes historical-biographical articles by Bottini and Carlino, one on biblical theology by Niccacci, and one on Spirituality by Oppes.

From the Far East, from Hong Kong there is the contribution by LIONEL GOH, a Friar Minor from the province “ Regina di Cina” in Taiwan. He is the disciple of

Father Benjamin Leung, one of the youngest members of the Chinese Studium Biblicum, chosen by Friar Allegra, which Friar Goh directed from 2001 to 2007. This contribution is the Italian translation of Friar Gabriele's last writings, (entitled in English: "*The Chinese people are now at the heart of my thoughts*") which appeared in the journal *Vox Cleri* in August 1975. It is a very important document because it enables readers to understand the last period of Friar Allegra's life and especially his last days. It also deals with the future of the church and of the Franciscan order in China.

The other unpublished text by Friar Allegra included in this issue (*The First Letter of St. Peter*) has been edited by LUIGI ORLANDO, Professor of New Testament Exegesis at the Faculty of Theology in Bari in Apulia, Italy and at the Faculty of Theology at the Pontificia Università Antonianum in Rome. In a most competent manner Orlando presents Friar Allegra "at work", the exegete Allegra who studies and explains the Holy Scriptures and in particular the First letter of St. Peter: this is something new about Friar Allegra, at least in Italian.

Before the in-depth study on Friar Allegra there is an article entitled: *The Inner China* by JEAN-PIERRE JOSSUA, Professor at the "Centre Sèvres" in Paris and at the Research centre "Le Saulchoir". It is a real journey to innermost China, a journey through a land in which many French poets such as P. Claudel, V. Segalen, Saint-John Perse, H. Michaux lived. In his role as a specialist of "theology and literature" Jossua leads us, by hand or it may be better to say with his heart, through the essence of China which Friar Allegra loved and for which he lived.

There are also three contributions from Jerusalem in the present issue of *Quaderni*. CLAUDIO BOTTINI, who holds the Chair of Introduction and Exegesis of the New Testament at the "Studium Biblicum Franciscanum" of which he has been dean since 2002, presents precious memories of Friar Allegra's stay in the Holy Land: «...I would have loved to stay in Jerusalem» in the article: *Father Gabriele Maria Allegra and the Holy Land*. Including studies on what has been already published and what is contained in the archives of the Studium and of the Custodia of the Holy Land, Bottini offers further information on Friar Allegra's life and on what was especially important for him: the Holy Scriptures, his studies and his exegesis, the Studium Biblicum of Jerusalem and of all the Holy Land as, of course, it must be for a son of St. Francis. Bottini also underlines Friar Allegra's love for the preaching of the Word of God, for religious and Franciscan life and for the celebration of the love of God in the liturgy and in prayers. Bottini helps us to discover this with the publication of some pages from the "Diaries of S. J. Saller", which is contained in the archive of the Flagellation. The publication, which is a sort of appendix to this article, of 12 letters

by Friar Allegra to Father and Professor Bellarmino Bagatti, offers further proof of the importance of Bottini's contribution to this issue.

In this edition of *Quaderni Biblioteca Balestrieri* there is an article by ALVIERO NICACCI, who holds the chair of Exegesis of the Old Testament and biblical Hebrew in the "Studium Biblicum Franciscanum" in Jerusalem, which he directed from 1990 to 1996. In *Father Allegra, the Word of God, China and the Holy Land* the author writes about what he calls Friar Allegra's three loves. As an expert on the Old Testament, Niccacci draws attention to a key passage connected with Friar Allegra's vocation and mission, Isaiah 49,12, where "the land of Sinim" and the biblical concept of the creation which Friar Allegra used to enjoy relating to Chinese cosmogony but, also to the Christocentric vision of Duns Scotus and to Teilhard de Chardin and his "christification of the universe". The article by Niccacci leads us directly to Friar Allegra's exegesis, to his distinction between literary and spiritual levels and his ability to compare the faith founded on the Bible with Chinese culture, with a medieval philosopher such as Scotus and with present-day authors such as the Jesuit de Chardin.

Another article from Jerusalem is by MASSIMO CARLINO, Friar Minor from the Minorite Province of Calabria and student of Biblical Sciences and Archaeology at the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum. It is entitled: *The Word of God becomes a book in China. The work of Father Gabriele Maria Allegra ofm*. Carlino tells the complete story of Friar Allegra, from his birth to his departure for China, to his life in China before the translation of the Bible into Chinese, up to the work of the Word of God translated into Chinese, until the "dies natalis" of Friar Gabriele.

At the end of this issue of *Quaderni Biblioteca Balestrieri* there is an article by STÉPHANE OPPES about the presence of St. Francis's spirituality in Friar Allegra's *Memoirs*. This article is entitled: *Friar Gabriele Allegra's spirituality; his Memoirs in the light of St. Francis's Writings*. It is based on the lecture given by the editor of the *Memoirs* at Acireale, in Sicily on 21st January 2007 for the opening of the celebrations for the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Venerable Friar Gabriele Maria Allegra.

With this monograph issue on the figure and the work of Friar Gabriele Maria Allegra, a little more than a year after the celebrations for the hundredth anniversary of his birth, organized by the Province of the Most Holy Name of Jesus of the Friars Minors of Sicily, with its great number of highly-qualified lay members, the *Quaderni Biblioteca Balestrieri* continue the Franciscan tradition of studies and publication already established with the monograph issues on La Pira and the Second Vatican Council. As the head of the Library, Father Giuseppe Balestrieri, teaches us, study in

order to preach and to announce: study in order “to know”, in other words in order to love «the truth which makes us sublime» (*Par. XXII,42*), the truth which revealed itself in the life and works of Friar Gabriele Maria Allegra.

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[traduzione di MARIA GRAZIA CANNATA]