

TIME TO KEEP SILENCE¹

GRACE PURSGLOVE

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven . . . a time to get, and a time to sow; and a time to keep silence. (ECC. 3, 7)

ON the 16th March, 1902, Emilia Emaldi was delivered of her second child and, to her great joy, a son. Her friends had previously told her to prepare the long robe as he would be a priest. The thought gave her much pleasure as it was her dearest wish to give a son to the priesthood.

At this time, the family lived in S. Lorenzo near Lugo in the beautiful province of Ravenna in north-east Italy. Three years later they moved to the ancient seaport of Ravenna, but with the entry of Italy into the war in 1915 the heavy bombing forced them to return to Lugo. They suffered great hardship, and the father, Francesco Emaldi, was forced to work at anything which came his way in order to make a living.

The boy, who had been christened Alfeo, was nervous and naughty. He adored his father, whom he always obeyed promptly, but although he loved his mother dearly he behaved badly towards her.

When he was four years old he went to the infants' school and proudly displayed on his breast a medal which he had won for being the best boy. After a few years in the primary state school he went to the seminary. His mother urged him to study, but he continued to be so naughty that the neighbours complained he influenced their children adversely. In direct contrast to his behaviour at home he was considered nervous and timid at school. His mother despaired of her wish that her son would ever become a priest because of his headstrong ways.

One day, the priest at SS. Simone and Juda suggested

¹ I would like to record my grateful thanks to Father Emaldi for his kind help and permission to write fully, also for his family's kind hospitality to me while in Lugo. Grateful thanks, too, to Father Frasinetti for his liaison services between us.—G.P.

that Alfeo should go to the Salesian School, but he refused to go. A few days later he met some of the boys from this school and liked them so much that he changed his mind and became a day boy. It was while he was there that he became interested in sermons and felt that he too would like to preach. So he spoke about his desire with the priest in Ravenna and agreed to enter the seminary in that town.

His mother had never told him of her fond hope that he would become a priest, so that the call was not influenced by her wishes. When he first went to Ravenna and put on the priest's habit his mother said, 'At least I have seen him dressed as a priest'. The fact that her eyesight was poor gave poignance to her remark. Unfortunately Alfeo inherited this myopia.

Francesco Emaldi had never thought of his son entering the priesthood, but, after hearing the mother's remark and reflecting on the myopia which would prevent him from following other occupations, he consented.

Alfeo studied at Ravenna for two years and then one day he saw a picture of the Salesian missionaries departing for the foreign field. God called him to go abroad and he was much impressed by the quotation on the card: 'Who leaves father and mother for me, I will give him eternal life'.

Apart from the obvious call, Alfeo was desperately afraid of hell and felt that if he went as a missionary he would escape hell, thus gaining eternal life. For two years he was keen to merit such a reward and then he was seized by doubts. This period of doubt lasted a long time and as a result the boy suffered, mentally and physically, becoming thin and pale. It was as though the devil told him: 'Do what you will, you will surely go to hell'.

At last the boy answered: 'I will do my duty absolutely even though there is only the *inferno*'. With this affirmation the boy's heart was filled with ecstasy and all fear of hell was removed now that he was serving God for love and not for a reward. This was such an uplifting experience that Alfeo has never forgotten it.

In obeying the missionary call Alfeo was asked to make his biggest sacrifice, that of leaving his beloved mother and father. He was unhappy that he could not repay them for

their sacrifices in educating him, and now he would cause them further grief by going abroad. To use the Psalmist's idiom, he knew that his father loved him as the pupil of his eye. The boy battled through three or four years of indecision and when he thought of his parents he tried to dismiss the thought of being a missionary. Alternately he felt that God would not select him for so great a vocation and at that thought he was so distressed that he prayed for a 'lost vocation', that is, the vocation of a person who has not accepted the call. After much prayer Alfeo said simply: 'God won'.

Even so, fresh doubts arose later when he read in a book that St Francis of Assisi would not become a priest because of his great humility. Alfeo laid out his secular clothes ready, thinking that when someone from home visited him, he would leave in lay attire. In recounting this, years later, Alfeo said: 'God permitted it not'. He remembered the words 'Do nought without taking advice and you will have no remorse'. He resolved to discuss it with his father, feeling confident that he would be allowed to leave the seminary. All his father said was: 'You are mad. Go and play, and when your heart is cool, come back to make a decision.' The temptation passed and he reverted to his secret desire to be a missionary.

At this time he had an extraordinary dream in which a lion blocked his way from reaching the will of God. The lion was on its back and tried to bite him, but stopped as Alfeo started to make the sign of the Cross. Alfeo did not finish and the lion went for him again. He tried a second time with the same result, but at the third effort he completed the sign of the Cross and the lion was defeated. He awoke, confident that he would win always.

Alfeo told the Director, who replied that it was certainly the boy's vocation. He then prepared to become a missionary and saw the Bishop of Ravenna, Mgr Morganti, who congratulated him on his faith. The Bishop asked him if he preferred one institute above another and when he replied 'No', said that he would send him as a pledge of friendship to his successor at Parma. The reply came that he would be taken gladly if he were not an only son.

This difficulty had not occurred to Alfeo, and the Institute asked his father for a declaration that he would leave his son free to go without the responsibility of helping his parents. The boy was so worried by this fresh obstacle that he asked his father to come to see him.

Francesco Emaldi was not pleased with this new desire of his son's to be a missionary and reproached him for ingratitude to his parents. His final words were: 'I will bind you by the leg to the table in Italy in all things of this kind'. Alfeo did not contradict his father, but his own will was made up. His father went to see the Director at Parma and, in stating his case, said in his picturesque Italian: 'If a man lose an eye, what can he do?' The Director, being a kind and wise man, distracted the father's attention by giving him a meal and taking him round the Institute with the result that he was extremely interested in all he saw. About this time Alfeo's mother had a dream in which she felt he was unhappy, and on waking she went to see him at Ravenna. She told him of her dream and enquired the cause of his unhappiness. He replied: 'If with my lips I say that I will not go, I cannot quieten my heart.' On hearing this, she said, kindly, 'My dear son, do what God tells you to do'.

So at last, Alfeo entered the Institute at Parma and found to his surprise that he had to take three vows, Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. Had he known this, he would not have entered, having been frightened in early childhood by going into a dark convent. His spiritual father in Ravenna took him to the Institute at Parma and there mentioned the boy's nervousness. However, Alfeo was so happy at Parma that he lost all his nervousness.

While there, an epidemic of influenza raged and all the students fell ill except Alfeo and one other. They nursed the students and finally Alfeo caught the infection, which turned first to pleurisy and then to tuberculosis. He went home for some time and tried to recover in the sun, but on seeing the specialist in Parma he was told there was no hope. The young man of eighteen then went to the Sanctuary at Monte Berrico, for a nine days' course of prayer. On the seventh day he fully recovered, never having any

recurrence of the disease. He returned to Parma with a clean bill of health, and in 1926, at the age of twenty-four, was sent to China. He first went to Honan Chengchow, where he did the ordinary work of a missionary.

When talking to a Chinese about demon-possession and scarcely knowing the language, he was delighted to find he was understood when he spoke in the dialect of his native Romagna!

Two years later Father Emaldi went to Loyang, eventually returning to Honan Chengchow. In 1937 the Sino-Japanese war started, the conclusion of which found the Communists considerably stronger.

Father Emaldi was recalled to Italy in 1947, but when he reached Shanghai he received a telegram directing him to Shantung. At that time the Communists were near the place where he ministered and in 1948 finally came to Shantung. He was afraid of them and hoped to go away, but on finding that the previous missionary had been recalled by his Superior he felt that he could not leave the Christians alone.

On the arrival of the Communists, Father Emaldi was surprised to find how kind they were; the Christians were treated extraordinarily well. On the wall of the city the Communists had written: 'We will not take a thread off the people'. Later, the people said ironically: 'Not a thread, but all'. Before the Communists were recognized the missionaries were free to go anywhere, but afterwards, although told they were free, they were restricted in every direction.

Formerly Father Emaldi was free to visit all sick in the hospital, but under the new regime he had to get a permit to see each patient. This wasted much valuable time and often a patient died while waiting for spiritual comfort. Eventually Father Emaldi told the Communists that this was impossible and explained that it also wasted their time. So they made an exception in his favour and gave him special permission to visit the sick.

One day he was going up a mountain and met a soldier who asked, 'Old European, are you not afraid that the Communist soldiers will kill you?' To which the Father replied, 'Soldier, are you not afraid Chiang Kai-shek will

get you?' The soldier replied, 'For you, it is a great honour if you die'. Father Emaldi agreed. 'Yes, for me it is a great honour. I am a man; you can take away my body but you cannot take my soul. You say that man comes from monkeys. Is it that you are a monkey?' The soldier was not pleased at this twist to the conversation and ended it abruptly.

From there Father Emaldi went to a Christian community founded by a Franciscan friar about three hundred years ago. The two preceding Fathers were killed by the Communists, and the Christians were overjoyed to see Father Emaldi. They explained that the Communists were holding a conference in the church and it was impossible to get the key. The Father asked if anyone could open the church without a key, and a young man volunteered to get through the window and so opened the door from the inside. They went into the church in spite of the Communist prohibition. The date was the 16th December, 1948, just nine days before the Feast of the Nativity. Father Emaldi was touched by this service at which the people sang and prayed. He was constrained to preach to them, and while he spoke he saw that Communists were listening at the door. They allowed the service to finish without interruption and then told the congregation that they must not attend church. 'We will not have Catholics, Protestants, or any other religion. You must listen to our orders; if not, we will punish you.'

The officer saw Father Emaldi, who asked him what was the meaning of religious liberty. He replied, 'I don't know what you say.'

At that time Father Emaldi had a permit which allowed him to visit four places, but the permit card was so small that only three were marked on it, the missing name being this particular community, so he was told he could stay only one night.

The Christians asked Father Emaldi to hear their confessions before he left. He stayed up all night while five hundred confessed. Just as the sun rose he stopped the confession and celebrated Mass, returning later to hear the remaining confessions.

At their conclusion he went to the superior officer, who

told him: 'We respect religious liberty.' Father Emaldi then asked if he might stay and celebrate the Christmas Feast with his people. The officer gave permission and said that the others would not trouble him. The Communists tried to make the people afraid, but did not succeed, so that all went to church and celebrated a happy Christmas.

Father Emaldi left them, hoping to come again at Easter, but was unable to celebrate it with them. A Chinese priest went instead and on Easter morning the Communists arrested him. Eight days later the Chinese priest was taken to his home, no longer yellow but black, bruised from innumerable beatings and with his ribs broken. The next day he died.

After the liberation, the people were free only to follow their superiors' wills. They were called to listen to the Communists' Conference and told they were absolutely free to go. It was, of course, an order and no freedom of will could be exercised. The people were told the precepts of this new materialism and that religion was no use. Any who followed the white missionaries were reactionaries. Throughout the day people visited the church, but among them were always the secret police, ready to detect treason.

The Mission School was being used as a hospital for Communist soldiers, and unceasingly, day and night, they tramped through the priests' house, preventing the inmates having any rest. Much damage was done to the house, windows broken, and inside many things were deliberately smashed. Some of the soldiers asked Father Emaldi if he had a radio and would not believe him when he said that he had not. He told them to search the house, but although they could not find one they refused to believe him. During the day he sang and this convinced the soldiers that a radio was concealed in the house.

'Very well', he said. 'You shall see my radio. Two go into that room and two come with me.' He took them into the garden, lifted off the rose from the spout of the watering-can and, putting it to his mouth, sang part of an opera. The two inside were not convinced until they too saw what he did.

The Communists instigated a whispering campaign that

they would take the little girls from the Mission Home; this was done only in order to make the people angry. Father Emaldi was given permission to visit Tientsin, where he had lived six years earlier, and on his arrival this time went to visit a Christian family. After leaving this family his friends were told that he was an imperialist and they were spies. They would be punished if they did not break relations with him.

When Father Emaldi heard this, he shaved his beard and changed his priest's habit for a short coat so that he was not recognized as a priest. He read later in *The Chinese Daily News* that all missionaries were free to preach their doctrine inside their churches. He thought, How like a caged bird!

The Christians were asked to help and a branch of the Legion of Mary was instituted. The churches were frequented more than before, despite the fact that Communist police were always at the door to see what people of any importance went in. The restrictions became tighter and finally the Communists, who hated the Legion of Mary, outlawed it. All people whose names were on the roll were called repeatedly to the Tribunal to say that the Legion of Mary was a reactionary organization. They tried to compel members to agree and to say that it was a spy ring of the U.S.A. Terrible persecution followed. They did not kill directly, but wore down their victims by continual interrogation.

When Father Emaldi went to the Tribunal he saw on the walls the ironical words: 'We will not destroy religion but only purify.'

The Bishop of Tientsin was expelled, then the European Fathers. On the fifteenth of November, twenty Communists went to Father Emaldi and told him that the church, hospital and house would be taken over. One Father Dagnino, whose name was not given at the Association, was allowed to remain and say Mass but was not free to hear confessions.

Father Lampii and Father Emaldi, both intimately connected with the Legion, were arrested and each put into a small room in the house. The windows were closed and sealed, while soldiers remained on guard.

On the second day four men ordered Father Emaldi to write down his crimes against Mao-dre-tung, leader of the Chinese Communists: 'Name . . . Surname . . . Addresses of all men incorporated with him in his Mission.' They thought that a Christian man had committed some crime and made him give the name of his confessor. Under stress this man gave Father Emaldi's name, and the Father was asked to say what crime the man had confessed. Father Emaldi replied that it was impossible to give such information as all confessions were secret. The Communists replied that a good man should have no secrets.

After this he was left with one guard, and given pen, ink and paper. He was compelled to write a confession or self-accusation. Before writing he thought hard and finally wrote, 'I came to China for the propagation of the Catholic Faith in which I am born, live, and hope to die.'

The guard said, 'Have courage, write; the more you write clearly, the more indulgent shall we be with you.'

Father Emaldi said 'Thank you' to the guard, who then went from the room to pace up and down the passage. The Father's thoughts turned to those three hundred missionaries, twenty-seven bishops and sixty sisters who were then in prison. In a Chinese prison people are herded like animals into one large room, forced to sit on the floor and not allowed to move or speak. Under these conditions, and tormented by lice, their sufferings were beyond endurance. For food they were given maize flour mixed with water and after months of this inhuman treatment they lost all sense of will or control. At night great electric lights shone directly on to their faces and for many hours the unfortunate prisoners were harshly interrogated. After bitter prolongation of this treatment, some would agree that they had committed crimes because thereby they hoped for death's release.

Father Emaldi, acutely conscious of the brutal methods employed, was afraid that if applied to him he might betray his friends. He thought, 'For me, no other way; if I can become dumb I am sure of victory, because, though I cannot speak, they can roast me or boil me but they cannot make me speak!'

He had in his pocket a small razor-blade and thought that if he cut his tongue he would be dumb. He took the blade and, being a little nervous of causing pain, tested himself by cutting a small piece first. Surprised that he felt no pain but was only conscious of the taste of blood, he was encouraged to complete the process. He took the blade in the middle and sawed off about three inches of tongue. Having done this, he found he could still speak so he sawed off the remainder of loose tongue. In doing this he cut the artery and the blood gushed forth about one metre's distance. He stayed for some time with his mouth wide open, then the blood congealed and he was able to close it. Father Emaldi then wrote on his confession: 'To avoid treason I have cut out my tongue. 17.11.51.'

All this time the guard paced up and down, unaware of what had occurred, for Father Emaldi had performed this heroic act silently and alone. He was surprised that he did not faint, but looked down at the blood which had formed a red flag on the floor and under his feet!

When the guard saw it, he dashed off madly. Six hours later, three men took Father Emaldi to the hospital. The doctor gave him an intravenous saline and an injection. His clothes were removed as a precaution to prevent escape.

Another confession was brought to the Father to sign, but this he refused. He knew that they would not maltreat him as they did not want him to die. He heard them whisper that in the night when he was asleep, his finger would be dipped in the ink to make an impression on the confession. In China such an impression counts as a signature. He resolved to keep awake and did not sleep all night. He just closed his eyes and opened them whenever the guard went near him.

Next morning at nine o'clock, Father Lampii, in the charge of a policeman, came to tell him that they were both summoned to the Tribunal. He made signs that it was impossible for him to go and he was taken in a rickshaw. During the Tribunal he was scolded severely for his subversive action. At sunset, after a long and exhausting day, he was told that he and Father Lampii were expelled from China for ever!

The two Fathers were put into jeeps with the policemen and taken to their house. There they were told to pack in ten minutes as the steamer was leaving. He took two small cases and they were taken by jeep to the steamer. He could not stand and rested on a sofa in the dining saloon for three days. On the third day the steamer got under way, but the doctor was so afraid of the Communists that he would not treat him until they were clear of the National Territory.

The Communists hoped the Father would die on the boat, but did not want the responsibility of his death on Chinese soil. A Spanish sister on board, who had also been expelled, treated his mouth with antiseptic and later the doctor gave him a bottle of oxygenated water to prevent infection.

During this period Father Emaldi was able only to drink, but by the time they reached Hong-kong he was able to eat a little food. Three days later, he left by Swedish plane for Oslo and in those ten days he had recovered completely. He arrived in Rome on the third of December; by a strange coincidence they were celebrating the Feast of St Francis Xavier, the Saint in whose name the Mission was founded.

He went to Piacenza and asked his Superior for news of his mother. When he had last heard in China she was very ill. His sister received a message to telephone the Institute, but would not believe the good news, not even when her brother spoke to her in their native dialect of Romagnolo. His sister told him that his mother's sickness was caused by heartache and urged that he should come home for the Feast of our Lady. The Superiors gave permission and it was arranged that Father Emaldi would return to his home on the morrow. The sisters were nervous of breaking this glad news to their sick mother and asked the doctor's advice. They spoke to her hopefully about his return, but she too refused to believe that such an event was possible. The next afternoon his sister went to the station to meet him, but was met by a Father from another branch of the same Institute. He carried a letter addressed 'To the Family of Emaldi'. They went home and read that Father Emaldi was convalescing and would be with his family in ten days. The writer and the bearer were unaware of Father Emaldi's complete recovery or that he was on his way.

In the late afternoon, accompanied by another Father, he returned to his native town after twenty-six years' absence. There was no one to greet them, so they walked towards his home. On reaching a small shop he asked the shopkeeper to tell Francesco Emaldi to speak with two Fathers outside. The man recognized Father Emaldi and told his father that his son was in the street, but he did not believe him.

Not certain of the effect the amputated tongue made to his voice, he was afraid of causing a shock to his sick mother. So, reaching the courtyard, he stood at the door and sang verses of a song which his mother had taught him long ago. It is called 'The Return of the Miner':

Ventisei anni che manco da casa
 (Twenty(six) years I am away from home)
O Mamma mia, ti voglio veder
 (O my Mother, I will see you)
O Mamma mia, ti voglio baciare
 (O my Mother, I will kiss you)
Al tua porta io vengo a bussar
 (I come to knock at your door)

With the voice of a young girl his aged and sick mother took up the reply, and he listened entranced as she sang:

Riconobbe la voce del figlio
 (She recognizes the voice of her son)
Tutto ad un tratto ad aprire se ne ando
 (Suddenly she went to the door)
O caro figlio, io ti credevo morto
 (My dear son, I thought you were dead)
Fra le tue braccia mi voglio consolar.
 (In your arms I will be consoled).

'He maketh the tongue of the dumb to sing.'