

SAINT MICHAEL GARICOITS AND THE BETHARRAMITE MISSION AD GENTES IN SOUTH-EASTERN ASIA

One day a Frenchman passing through Chiangmai asked me: “Which is the uniform of your Congregation?”. I answered: “Here I am, instantly, unreservedly, irrevocably, for love, to do God’s will”. He was so astonished by the formula that he wrote it in his book.

Our founder, Michael Garicoits, talking about the objective assigned to his congregation, used to say: “The aim of our society is not so much that of preaching, listening to confessions, teaching, etc., but that of forming men completely available to perform these ministries with holiness, when the bishop or the superior of the society entrusts it to them. The aim of the society, therefore, is to grow and to form such perfect ministers that, at the first sign of will by the bishop or superior, they may be properly chosen to work for the salvation of the souls” (*Fr. Duvignau, Un Maître spirituel du 19me siècle, p. 339*).

The characteristic singular to the Congregation can be found outside its works. Works are the casings of a content which is the spirit of the founder, who wants to reveal to us a particular face of God proper to the Congregation.

Echoing what I’ve just said, father Jean Mateo, former provincial superior of France, said: “The Fathers of Betharram exist within the Church not to teach in the schools, nor to preach in the parishes, nor to leave for missions. They came about because one day a Basque priest, Michael Garicoits, was upset by a certain face of God, because this “impassioned of God” felt animated to tell, to cry out this Name and this Face to the young, to the adults and to the poor of his time. Some disciples came and continued gathering, to tell and to cry out, through their lives, this same love and this same face, every time and everywhere they settled with their apostolic, missionary, educational communities.” (*Fr. Mateo, La vie religieuse, visages du Dieu de tendresse, p. 11*).

1 - Betharram sends its religious to the mission ad gentes

When Michael Garicoits founded his Congregation, he had no clear idea to do this or that work, to go to this or that place. Nevertheless, he had a program, the same program of the Heart of Jesus, the eternal Priest, the servant of the heavenly Father. He wanted its members to be servants of the Father and servants of mankind, always available to respond to all of God’s appeals. To him, every event was the Word of God. An appeal by a bishop was like the voice of God. This was the case when, in 1856, the bishop of Buenos Aires, a town full of Basques, made an appeal to the bishop of Bayonne who called upon Fr. Garicoits who immediately saw God’s will. This was the case when the superior of the Foreign Missions of Paris (M.E.P.), seeking help for the Chinese mission in Yunnan, a region too vast for the M.E.P., turned to Pope Benedict XV. The superior general of the M.E.P., who knew the Betharramite Congregation, contacted Fr. Paillas, superior general of Betharram, who asked for volunteers.

Among the numerous candidates, three were selected: Fathers Erdosaincy-Etchart, Palou and Pirmez, whose ages ranged between 35 and 39. They embarked for China in 1922. Others followed, some died in China. Betharram remained in Yunnan for 30 years until the communists came into power. Since 1951, all missionaries have been expelled; the last were Mgr. Lacoste, Fr. Toucoulet and Fr. Spini. It would have been easier to return to Europe and await orders from Rome for a new destination, but Mgr. Lacoste and Fr. Saint Guily, first superior of the mission of Tali, thought differently. They needed to ask for asylum in a nearby country in order to return to China when circumstances would permit it. Since they could not settle in Burma (all missionaries arriving in the country after 1946, the year of independence, had been expelled), Fr. Saint Guily wrote to Mgr. Chorin, apostolic vicar of Bangkok, to ask for hospitality in Thailand.

As Fr. Saint Guily’s request had not been precise, Mgr. Chorin, convinced to that he was dealing with a refugee missionary from China, accepted the request on a temporary basis. Actually, he had no authority to welcome other missionaries other than those from the M.E.P.. According to Canon law, the question should have been handled by Propaganda Fide and by the two Superiors general of Paris and of Betharram.

2 - We put roots in Northern Thailand.

Mgr. Chorin, in his benevolent prudence, assigned Fr. Saint Guily and some fathers who had joined him, as resident to the town of Chiangmai in the north of the country. The French Embassy permitted us to accommodate ourselves in the French Consulate which had been abandoned. We remained there until 1966, while waiting to build in another place.

Soon, the position of this group seemed to be compromised by the incertitude of the beginnings. From Betharram, the superiors requested a work to justify the presence of their religious in the apostolic vicarage of Bangkok and the sending of further volunteers who had just joined those present. As these religious had not been sent to Thailand by them, they wanted to clarify the situation. Undoubtedly they were right, but they seemed to be in too much of a hurry. Mgr. Chorin warded off any decisive engagement and, showing great benevolence to his religious, he replied that he had welcomed the refugee fathers of Betharram from China through charity and that he didn’t feel obliged to entrust them with any territory. He was right as well. Yet, the fathers of the M.E.P. of Bangkok, at least those higher placed,

suggested to waiting quietly. Everything would clear itself up in due time. In fact, a first step was taken when Mgr. Chorin, in September of 1953, entrusted the fathers of Betharram with the province of Maehongson and five administrative districts of the Chiangmai province, in order to settle their work of evangelisation, of course under his authority.

This was sufficient to provide a territorial base for the missionaries' activities..

Before being sure of staying in Thailand, three fathers arrived in Bangkok at the beginning of January 1953: Fr. Saubatte, a refugee from China and two new fathers, Bonnat and Lhouerrou.

Men want things to be clear from the beginning. The Holy Spirit leaves men in fog and incertitude so that they realise that they can do nothing without the help of God. God intervenes then like the sun that makes fog disappear. The conversion of a large number of people of the hilltribes will be a sign proving that the arrival of the Betharramites was in harmony with the Will of God. If men like straight lines, God likes to join men in curved lines and to surprise them where they don't expect to find him.

I wanted to insist on the origins of our mission in Thailand because the members of the Congregation ignore how, coming from China, we ended up in Thailand.

With ups and downs, the work, with the instruments at our disposal, started to give its fruits. This hidden work, without publicity, carries the seal of devotion and simplicity.

Saint Michael wanted his priests to be a real mobile camp of picked soldiers, ready to run, even and above all to the most difficult ministries, unwanted by others (*Fr. Bourdenne, La vie et l'oeuvre, p. 65*). He wanted a mobile camp, today we would say a "commando", which always implies a limited number of soldiers. Both in China and in Thailand, we were always a small group because, among the many volunteers, only a few were chosen.

Since some volunteers had worked in China with the mountain people, these fathers began exploring the tribes populating the hills of northern Siam. The Karians form the largest group; Fathers Seguinotte and Fognini, who had evangelised the Katchins in the Yunnan, asked permission to do the same with the Karians. Therefore, they started to explore the hills not far from Chiangmai. They realised that with the Karians there were good hopes. A house was bought in Chomthong, 60 km. from Chiangmai. It was adapted and enlarged and Fathers Fognini and Seguinotte settled there in March of 1954. It was their base towards the mountain villages.

The school, begun in Chomthong, was transferred to Mepon. The year 1955 is marked by the foundation of the catechism centre of Mepon; soon, at the edges of rice-fields and forests, the chapel, the residence, a modest building for boys and another for girls, were built. Year after year, other constructions were added to these, forming a nice complex.

I have anticipated things a bit talking about the Karians; let's take a step backwards.

From the end of 1952 to the summer of 1955 Fathers Fognini, Saubatte, Carraro, Oxibar and Trezzi, all arriving from China, after a rest period in their native countries, come to Thailand; four young fathers: Fathers Bonnat and Lhouerrou in 1953, Fathers Salla and Bataillès in 1955, joined the group of Betharram in Chiangmai. By then it had become a group of 15 missionaries. Even Mgr. Lacoste, the last to leave the mission of Tali with Fathers Toucoulet and Spini, arrives in 1954. Mgr. Chorin delegates to him all powers to run the apostolic activity of his brothers, while keeping for himself the high jurisdiction of Rome.

In August of 1954, the apostolic vicar of Bangkok entrusts the parish of Chiangmai to the Fathers of Betharram, as he had done a few months before with the five administrative districts. Mgr. Lacoste, in agreement with Fr. Saint Guily, appointed Fr. Londaitzbèhère as parish priest of Chiangmai. Fr. Pedebideau is placed at his side as coadjutor.

3 - First development 1955 - 1956

At the beginning of 1955, Mgr. Lacoste, in agreement with the religious superior, decides the following destinations: Fr. Lanusse to Sobrim, Fr. Lhouerrou to Chomthong, Fathers Seguinotte, Fognini and Bonnat to Mepon, Fr. Sablayrolles to Chiangdao, Fr. Trezzi to Phrao, Fr. Oxibar to Fang.

With the exception of Sobrim, where there was a small community which however no longer progressed, we had to start from scratch everywhere. A few Christians are present in each of these villages, but these are very small cores. At Lampun, 27 km. south of Chiangmai, two missionaries will continue but without success. Mgr. Lacoste will pay regular visits for 15 years, but without success. It's a Buddhist town, even the Protestants had tried to settle there but without success. At Chomthong and at Ban Pa, 5 km. from Chomthong, some conversions take place.

At the end of May, Fathers Seguinotte, Fognini and Bonnat settle in Mepon. From there, they explore the hills and the district becomes larger. During the same month, the residence is inaugurated, while the chapel is inaugurated on August 15th. Four years later, Fr. Fognini finds a place in the district of Maechem, a day-walk from Mepon, in a region counting various groups of Christians and catechumenists. Other districts arise thanks to the new catechumenists who will become missionaries to their own tribes. The conversion of the Karians, at the very beginning, occurs by contagion: they invite their relatives to convert to Christianity. An important thing: the *raison d'être* of Mepon will be the Christian education of children and the formation of catechists who will become collaborators of the missionaries.

The region of Maesarieng opens up to Christianity. Fr. Pedebideau, after a stage at Mepon, settles in the subprefecture of Maesarieng.

From the beginning of 1957, Fr. Seguinotte, together with a catechist arriving from Burma, takes a first tour around Methoklo in the province of Maehongson where, for a month, he visits many villages; some hundred families register for the catechumenate. Fr. Pedebideau visits them from Maesarieng.

Let's leave the mountains to talk a bit about the work in the Buddhist environment. Fr. Londaitzbéhère multiplies his meetings with the people of Chiangmai and surrounding areas.

Fr. Sablayrolles receives some families from Pangkwang, 23 km. from Changdao, where there is already a Christian core.

The foundation of the village of Huei Bong, 20 km. south of Fang, dates back to February, 1957. Arriving from the region of Maesarieng stimulated by a Karian named Pina, who saw no future in the mountains, 6 Karian families, who were already catechumenists for one year thanks to a visit by Fr. Bonnat in their region, buy some rice-fields and settle there. For two years the fathers of Mepon visit the village once in a while. At the end of 1958, there are some thirty families. Fr. Lanusse becomes the father responsible for this village. From 1959 on, some of them found a new village 60 km. away, named Muan Ngam.

On Mgr. Chorin's request, Fr. Pucheu is entrusted with the village of Viang Papao, which had remained vacant after the death of Fr. Levrel, M.E.P., killed on January 1st, 1955. He settles there on February 9th, 1958, and begins building a school in autumn of the same year. Two female religious of the congregation of the Sacred Heart of Bangkok help him. Fr. Sablayrolles opens a school in Chiandao in March of 1958, and starts to build a small church dedicated to St. Michael Garicoits.

Fr. Bataillès accepts the proposal by Mgr. Lacoste to open an apprenticeship centre in the town of Chiangmai. The objective of this is to give professional training to the poor boys. He starts with carpentry, later he will open a garage.

At the end of the same year, while Fr. Lanusse settles in Huai Bong, Fr. Mirco is appointed in Maesarieng. Methoklo is detached from Maesarieng to create two distinct districts in the province of Maehongson. Fr. Pedebideau will settle in Methoklo.

In Mepon many girls have been admitted to the centre. With the boys, the number increases to some hundred. Religious people are needed. Mgr. Lacoste turns to the Daughters of the Cross who were already present at Tali in the Yunnan. They refuse. Then he turns to the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartre who are already present in Thailand for the education of girls. The provincial superior refuses. Later, a visitor, informed of the fact, will regret this refusal.

Fr. Seguinotte, on vacation in 1958, with the approval of Mgr. Lacoste, seeks a congregation willing to cooperate in the work with the Karians. He calls on the congregation of the Salesian Sisters of Immaculate Mary. They were in China when the communists came into power. The education of the Karian girls will be their task as perhaps the formation of some of them to religious life. In fact, 2 or 3 youths think about this possibility since their arrival in Mepon.

At this point, I would like to point out something. St Michael Garicoits, like St Vincent de Paoli, said: "Providence must not be bypassed". When making the appeals to some religious persons, some missionaries working in the Karian environment thought that the timing was off, that it was premature. And, in fact, these female religious had to leave after six years of presence, as requested by the Superior general. The sisters, not skilled enough in the Thai could not possibly form Karian girls, just out of paganism. This hindered the promotion of the diocesan congregation founded by Mgr. Lacoste. Many sisters left during a period of ten years; in 1975 only three were left. The arrival of Mgr. Rath was needed to start the congregation again.

The fathers of Betharram never tried to obtain an independent mission. Until then, Mgr. Lacoste like the others, worked under the authority of Mgr. Chorin, apostolic vicar of Bangkok. However, it was expected that Rome, sooner or later, would decide to divide this huge vicarage, first of all by detaching the provinces of the North.

On December 29th 1959, in fact, a decree of the S.C. (Propaganda Fide) sets up the apostolic Prefecture of Chiangmai composed of 8 provinces. Mgr. Lacoste is appointed apostolic administrator, while remaining bishop of Tali.

Providence wanted that in that period, Father Mirande, superior general of the institute, was present in the Mission. At the same time the church of Methoklo was inaugurated and for the occasion, some fathers, who were working with the Karians, gathered together.

Fr. Fognini, detached from Mepon, definitively settles in Mechem. He starts to gather around him some thirty Christian families scattered in the outskirts and founds a village which will become the centre of his district, Meoklo now called Patung. He is in charge of the area of Mechem; the result is a large number of conversions.

4 - Chiangmai becomes Apostolic Vicarage

Mgr. Chorin arrives in Chiangmai on February 14th, 1960 to settle some matters concerning the separation of the northern part of his vicarage. It is agreed that Fathers Verdière and Grangé will leave northern Siam to reach Bangkok. Moreover, the sisters of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Bangkok, of diocesan law, will continue to work in the new vicarage of Chiangmai. Not until June 24th did Mgr. Gordon, apostolic delegate, come to officially and canonically set up the apostolic vicarage. On the same day, also the feast of the Sacred Heart is celebrated which is the feast of the parish and of the congregation of Betharram. The fathers of the M.E.P. leave northern Siam; new

nominations take the place of the vacant positions; it's the turn of the Betharramite fathers. Fr. Trezzi is in charge of Phan, while Fr. Carraro goes to Lampang. Fr. Oxibar leaves Fang to go to Phrao.

Around Maesarieng, where Fr. Mirco takes things in hand, many Karian families ask to enter the catechumenate. Many of them migrate to Huei Bong and to Muang Ngam. In Chomthong, Fr. Lhouerrou builds a chapel which will be blessed by Mgr. Lacoste in January of 1961. In Mechem, Fr. Fognini opens a small school. At the same time, he builds a fairly large wooden chapel.

Until now, pastoral attention to the young involved only the students of our schools. The priests charged with the specific positions, the male and female religious, were sufficient in number to assure this task. The foundation in Chiangmai of a State University creates a new place and therefore special pastoral action is needed.

The Jesuits had already opened a university foyer in Bangkok. Mgr. Lacoste asks the provincial superior of the Jesuits of Formosa and of Thailand to prepare something similar in Chiangmai. The Ursuline Sisters of Chiangmai accept to help the female university youth.

A large area in front of the university is for sale.

The Jesuits and the Ursuline Sisters find the necessary funds to create the foyer.

The village of Muang Ngam develops. Mgr. Lacoste asks Fr. Salla to be in charge of the village for a while.

Mgr. Lacoste buys some land to create a place for the professional formation in household management of girls from Laos to be entrusted to the Salesian Sisters of Immaculate Mary, already resident in Mepon. This place would be the residence for the sisters of Mepon, also..

In 1962 Fr. Luzzi replaces Fr. Trezzi in Muang Phang, where he will stay for 12 years. He will enlarge the school, build the parish house and restore the church.

Fr. Carraro begins building a huge scholastic complex at the female college in Lampang.

Towards the end of 1963, Fr. Bataillès moves to a place 6 km. far from Chiangmai on the road to Fang. He quits the apprenticeship for carpenters because of several difficulties and launches himself in the mechanical sector. Drivers of cars and trucks will start going to his garage to have their vehicles fixed.

Fr. Oxibar, at the age of 67, dies of intestinal cancer on February 2nd, 1964. He is the first Betharramite to die in Thailand. Fr. Sablayrolles, from Chiangdao, is left in charge of the school and Christians of Phrao for a while.

In January of 1964, Mgr. Lacoste blesses the first stone of the cathedral which will be finished around the beginning of 1965. On February 28th, 1965 the ceremony of takes place. The nuncio, the bishops of Thailand, as well as the ambassador of France, participate in the ceremony. Over a thousand Christians, of which 400 Karians, participate coming from all the districts.

In 1964, the Jesuits start building the main part of the university centre.

The foundation of a new place in Phrè is decided and Fr. Carraro is designated as the person responsible for it. Fr. Pucheu replaces him at Lampang, while Fr. Prachum, a former Salesian, is charged with Vieng Papao for three years.

The first Karian junior seminarians are sent to the minor seminary in Tharé. Out of the first seven, one dies during his first year of philosophy and one will be ordained in 1982. He will be the first Karian priest.

A project in favour of the lepers is under way. It foresees the foundation of a village to welcome the non-contagious lepers and to reintegrate them in social life. A piece of land is bought 3 km. far from Chomthong. A committee is set up, with Mgr. Lacoste as president and other 11 members, Christians and non Christians, and with Fr. Lhouerrou as responsible for Chomthong and entrusted with this task. He had some appropriate small houses built.

While the Salesian Sisters of Immaculate Mary leave Thailand, replaced by the Sisters of St Sebastian, another religious congregation comes to offer its help to the diocese of Chiangmai: the Sisters of Mary the Infant who had already worked in Burma. It's July of 1966. Mgr. Lacoste assigns Chiangrai to them, where no Christian core existed yet. Fr. Luzzi rented a house while waiting to buy a piece of land and build a larger house. This would become the providential occasion for a serious foundation in the town of Chiangrai. While waiting, Fr. Luzzi comes from Phan to celebrate Mass for the sisters.

5 - Chiangmai is set up as a Diocese

The hierarchy is established in Thailand in 1965. By that time there were 10 dioceses. On July 10th, 1966 Chiangmai is set up as a diocese. Mgr. Pedroni, apostolic pro-nuncio, chairs the ceremony. Mgr. Lacoste is appointed administrator, while remaining bishop of Tali.

In May of 1966, Fr. Carraro opens an elementary school in Phrè.

Fr. Pucheu builds a church in Lampang which will be blessed in August of 1967.

As the mission had bought some land in Chiangrai, Fr. Londaitzbéhère leaves Chiangmai, after 13 years there, and is appointed to Chiangrai. He won't stay there long. His health conditions will not allow him to remain in Thailand and he will return to France in 1969.

The sisters get in contact with the Lahou and Akha refugees arriving from Burma.

At the beginning of 1968, the effort towards ecumenism in the diocese takes a more precise shape. It is limited to the town of Chiangmai. The ceremony of unity is held both in the Protestant temple and in the cathedral. A large crowd, composed of Protestants and Catholics, gathers to pray together. During the ceremonies, there are chants, readings of biblical texts, and a sermon by the Catholics to the Protestants and vice-versa. The chants are prepared by both communities. Every year, in January, the ecumenical prayer gathers the two communities.

1969 is the year of changes. After the nominations of January, 1965 no remarkable changes had taken place in the missionary personnel.

Fr. Mirco leaves Maesarieng to become parish priest in Chiangmai. Fr. Salla, after two years as parish priest in Chiangmai, replaces Fr. Lanusse in Huei Bong who moves to Chomthong to replace Fr. Lhouerrou who becomes parish priest in Vieng Papao.

Fr. Perlini remains in Chiangmai to help Fr. Mirco. Fr. Rodriguez, who was the vicar for Fr. Pedebideau, becomes parish-priest in Methoklo, while Fr. Pedebideau returns to Maesarieng to replace Fr. Mirco.

In May of 1969, Fr. Urbani, appointed to Chiangrai, opens a school. The Sisters of Mary the Infant collaborate in this educational task.

The residence built by Fr. Luzzi in Phan is completed in February of 1970. As the group of Christians of Chiangkham joined to the one in Chiangrai includes a dozen families, the decision is made to buy land and build a chapel in the capital of the district.

In 1970, under the pressure of Fr. Mirco, the parish-priest in Chiangmai, the apostolic activity takes new shapes in the Christian community of the city. An association called "Credito Unione" comes to life, a conference of St Vincent de Paoli is created. The Christians are called to multiple initiatives and assistance activities.

Fr. Fognini asks Mgr. Lacoste to entrust the Western half of his district to another father. Fr. Donini is introduced by Fr. Lhouerrou, at the time superior of the mission.

In 1972, a seminarian, native of Phayao, of Chinese father and Northern Laotian mother, student in Pinang in Malesia, having completed philosophy, follows a stage by Fr. Pedebideau. He follows him on the mountains and gets in touch with the poor. He has not decided yet whether he will become a priest, but the work of the Father and the poverty of the people call to him and show him the particular face of the incarnate God who chooses poverty. Since then he has had great admiration for Betharram. And he makes his choice: to be a priest among the poor. He will study theology while reflecting on how to be a priest. This seminarian is non other than Fr. Niphot, parish-priest of Chiangmai since 1992 and general vicar. He is 49 years old: a priest since 1975, he calls himself the spiritual son of Betharram. He helped us in the formation of the candidates, by holding sessions before their entrance to the noviciate, and now he is member of the formation team.

The Superior General of the Italian society P.I.M.E. (Missionaries of Milan), following a visit paid by one of their priests to Mgr. Lacoste, asks him if some Betharramites, three to start with, would help with the mission in Chiangmai. Mgr. Lacoste accepts and three priests arrive in December of 1972. Two of them had already been to Burma. One of them, knowing the dialect, is entrusted with the Lahou tribe.

They are now approximately 12 in Thailand, 7/8 out of whom are in the north, in the diocese of Chiangmai; the others are in Bangkok.

As the Betharramites could no longer ensure the missionary work in the diocese, and no new missionary was expected, the position will be left to others, younger than us. An appeal is made to an American Redemptorist, Fr. Harry Thiel, for the evangelisation of the Mong people.

Mgr. Lacoste buys some land in Fang so that Fr. Zimbaldi (PIME) can create the Lahou centre. Today, it is the site of a beautiful church.

6 - The church of Chiangmai becomes autochthonous.

The Betharramites will be at the service of the diocesan bishop. They no longer have the task of the diocese, they become auxiliary priests of the local bishop.

The church must grow. From being a foreign church, it becomes autochthonous: it's in the nature of things. The successor of Mgr. Lacoste will be a Thai, Mgr. Ratna Bamrungtrakul. All 10 dioceses of Thailand have their own Thai bishop. This occurs under the pressure of the events taking place in the neighbouring countries. It's the life of the church, there are no ruptures, there is continuity.

The Betharramites leave some positions vacant to make room for the Thai priests. Fr. Mirco leaves his position to a Thai priest coming from the diocese of Rajburi. Another goes to Muang Phan. Fr. Pucheu returns definitively to Europe, Mgr. Lacoste moves to Viang Papao where he will remain for 10 years. Fr. Carraro returns to America in 1976. Lamapang and Phrè come under the jurisdiction of the P.I.M.E.

The Betharramites, by leaving the positions founded or served until then, go somewhere else. They conform, by doing so, to the spirit of St Michael who wanted them to be ready to go where they would be needed.

Since the time when Betharram has been working in the missions ad gentes, its religious have worked almost exclusively for the church without recruiting more of their own vocations.

Today there are some fifteen autochthonous priests. Thanks to Mgr. Lacoste, who had taken care of forming a local clergy, ordinations continued after Fr. Niphot's in 1975. Later, in 1982, on the occasion of the blessing of the church of Maesarieng, Mgr. Ratna ordained the first Karian priest. In 1996, there are 4 Thai priests, 9 Karian priests and 2 Lahou priests.

On May 5th, 1992, for the first time, a Thai diocesan priest becomes the parish priest of the cathedral of Chiangmai, although the diocese continues to call upon the priests of the diocese of Bangkok.

Four houses belong to the congregation of Betharram:

- The house of Betharram in Chiangmai.
- The house of Phayao where the applicant seminarians of the Congregation are formed (at juniorate level) under the guidance of Fr. Salla. The house is located on land given to the Congregation by the family of Fr. Niphot.
- Ban Pong, at the Burmese border, 14 km. from Maesai, where there is a centre for the formation of the girls of the Akha tribe run by Fr. Pensa; Fr. Pensa, moreover, works for the diocese by visiting the Akha villages. The land had been given to Betharram by an Italian benefactor.
- The house of Sampran, house of formation, in the vast outskirts of Bangkok.

7 - And the future of Betharram?

As requested by the superiors, Fr. Mirco has been charged to buy land in Sampran. Already in 1984, he gathered, in Maesarieng first under the guidance of Fr. Caset and then of Fr. Perlini, some boys with possible vocation. Later, Fr. Mirco moves them to Sampran, in a house bought from a Christian. The person responsible is Fr. O'Malley who is helped in his position first by Fr. Mirco and later by Fr. Perlini and now by a Formation Team linked with the Delegate and his Council and with the General Council.

There are now some fifteen who have professed. The elder missionaries, who have completed their work, leave the Mission ad gentes to those being formed today. The younger missionaries will work in a different way than their predecessors did; they will not repeat the past, because history is evolution and never repeats itself in the same way.

However, I have no doubts that it is with the same spirit of service and devotion, in faithfulness to the life and to the charisma of St Michael, that the change from the "elder" missionaries will occur, in a Thailand full of change. Betharram must respond, within the Church, to the hopes and challenges of this country so dear to every Betharramite!

Fr. Jean Baptiste BONNAT, s.c.j.