

17.1.1649,<sup>1</sup> from Isfahan submitted a 'dubium'—a 'doubt'—to the Procurator General of the Carmelites, Rome:

“. . . The object of the Father, who under the pretext of visiting adults, of whose conversion there is little or no hope, is looking for the small children of Muhammadans who are sick, and where he finds them in imminent risk of death, in place of the holy water and baptismal font of the gospel, he purifies them with the necessary blessings and makes Christians of them. Up till now the business has passed off happily, and in two years he has sent to Heaven more than 200 children of Muhammadans: all our writers, whom I have read, say that the practice is lawful; nevertheless there are not wanting some, both inside and outside (the Order), who say the contrary. Among ourselves the Fr. Vicar (Provincial) my predecessor . . . maintains that it is not lawful, and that the Church has no right to baptize without the consent of the parents, still more of someone in the utmost need and peril of death. . . . In particular the practice is opposed by a certain Dominican Father Paul” (i.e. Piromalli) “well known to Mgr Ingoli as a good preacher. . . . I suspect that he may have written, or will write, to them and protest. I wished therefore to forewarn your Reverence how the matter stands, and if possible to have some declaration from the Sac. Congregation that this practice is commended. . . .”

The answer to the 'doubt' was received in due course, and can be read in the report of the general session of the Sac. Congregation of Propaganda Fide, 13.2.1658:<sup>2</sup>

“The Secretary reported: ‘In the reports brought by a Carmelite Lay Brother from the missions of that Order in Persia and in Syria it is stated that the people there are wont, when sick, to summon the Fathers to bless them and read the Gospel, which they greatly revere: and, since a great number of these cases are of children past hope of living, they (i.e. the Carmelites) have started a practice of baptizing them secretly without the parents becoming aware of it, and (thus) of sending the children to Paradise: they do the same, when they perambulate the villages, and they assert that in this way several thousands have been baptized. I have had some doubt whether it is proper to do this, especially as regards those who perhaps recover and afterwards reach adult age.’

“Reply: Some of their Eminences answered that this 'doubt' had been examined formerly by the Sac. Congregation of the Holy Office, and had been determined affirmatively—that it could be allowed. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

The procedure demanded care and skill and assiduity: the Religious had to be sure in his conscience that, as far as his eye could detect, each infant would not survive its malady and natural remedies prove unavailing: it was further necessary that the intention to make a Christian of the infant by the process adopted should not be suspected (in the majority of instances at least) by the parents or relatives and an outcry, which might have untoward consequences for other Religious, avoided. Fr. Dionysius and others were aided, however, by the impression prevalent among Persians, the poor in particular, that the missionaries possessed a knowledge of medicine: the saying of the prayers of the rite over the sick child, the meaning of which was hidden to parents and others, was accepted as coming from persons respected for a holy life, 'darwish' if not 'muslim': it was, so to speak, a 'talism' (or 'talisman', as the English form of the word is). It does make for marvel by anyone acquainted with a peasantry

<sup>1</sup> O.C.D. 237 g; see also Fr. Stephen of Jesus, 18.11.1650, O.C.D. 235 d, as Visitor General: “This causes scruples to some of us: and so we represent it to the Sac. Congregation and Holy Office to check. . . .”

<sup>2</sup> See *Collectanea S. Congregationis seu Decreta, Instructiones, Rescripta, pro Apost. Missionibus*, Rome, 1893.

<sup>3</sup> The baptism of infants 'in articulo mortis' belonging to pagans or infidels has since become a recognized missionary practice: e.g. in 1932 for the vicariate of Alexandria (Egypt) 1,383 were so baptized “almost all of Mussulman families”: in 1933 there were baptized “43,366 pagans on the point of death, and 112,643 sons of pagans . . .” in the zones entrusted to the French 'Société des Missions Etrangères': in the year 1931-2 in the Belgian Congo 50,268 baptisms 'in articulo mortis' (see *Osservatore Romano*). Father Dionysius of the Crown of Thorns would appear to have been one of the earliest pioneers on a large scale.