



## **AFRICA/SIERRA LEONE – Death of "Bepi" Berton, the apostle of child soldiers in Sierra Leone**

Freetown (Agenzia Fides) - Fr. Giuseppe Berton, a Xaverian missionary, apostle of child soldiers in Sierra Leone died on June 25, at the mother house of the Xaverians in Parma.

In a note sent to Fides Agency the current superior of the Xaverians, Fr. Carlo Di Sopra remembers him like this: "Father Bepi had always been an active volcano in Sierra Leone, full of human and missionary resourcefulness, also thanks to the collaboration with agencies like the U.S. CRS, Caritas and Italian friends and benefactors. In all the activities and initiatives, this is what he aimed at: to form - men and women - free, conscious and self-sufficient, able to support their families and develop society. Now the "volcano" has died, but on his lava land thousands of people have taken deep root and will bear fruit. "

Another confrere, Fr. Vincenzo Munari, says: "I lived the last years in Kissy (Freetown) with Fr. Bepi Berton. What surprises me is that so many know him, especially on the outskirts of Freetown! He is on everyone's lips, to the point that wherever I go, even though I do not look like him at all, children shout, "Father Berton! Father Berton."

His activity with children - soldiers allowed him to maintain contacts and relationships with thousands of boys and girls, who are now the most resourceful young people in Freetown. Thanks to his affection and encouraged by his help, they managed to set up small businesses, rescuing them from a painful past that everyone wants to forget."

Since June last year, he was being treated in Parma. Lately he had spent a month in hospital and was discharged on June 19. Born in Marostica (Vicenza) on February 5, 1932, he was 81 years old.

From 1973 until the eve of his death, father Joseph - known to all as "father Bepi" – lived and worked in Sierra Leone, dedicating himself to missionary pastoral and social activity, in the diocese of Makeni and then in the capital Freetown.

During the ten-year war in Sierra Leone (1992-2000), he lived the dramatic events of the kidnapping by the rebels, who were also abusing child soldiers for mutilation, murder and all sorts of violence. Since then he had initiated projects that have enabled the recovery of thousands of boys and girls allowing them to lead a normal life.

In an interview with Fides released in 2004 (see Fides 29/1/2004) Fr. Berton said: "The most important challenge we face is to recover the identity of these people. They are still children because they have skipped some stages of their psychological development, but also have already experienced terrible experiences during the civil war. Having participated in the violence that rocked the country, the civilian population is not always able to accept and help them regain a normal life. "

For this supreme dedication, Father Berton received several prestigious awards by international Organizations, including the UN. In 2001, the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan wanted to meet the missionary in person and visit the rehab center in Kissy, on the outskirts of Freetown. As a result of this visit, Father Berton was called to testify in various international conferences, drawing the attention of crowded assemblies, as an "expert in humanitarian recovery". (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 27/06/2013)