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ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
SHILLONG - 3
(Meghalaya State - India)

Rev. Bro. Santo Mantarro

Dear Confreres,

On Sunday, 1st August 1971, Shillong witnessed an unusually touching scene. Well over 7,000 people, many of them in tears, accompanied the mortal remains of a man they loved, to his eternal resting place. It was indeed, a triumph, for one who always wished to remain unknown in spite of the great impact that he had on the lives of so many in and around Shillong. How very are those words of the Gospel, « he who humbles himself shall be exalted.»

Born at Casalvecchio Siculo, Sicily on 28-3-1890, Brother Santo Mantarro had his early education in the local school. But soon he was

forced by economic difficulties to give up school. He spent a sizeable portion of his youth in the fields. Then, on a fine day he chanced to come across some Salesians and was immediately conquered by their great interest in him. He decided to become a Salesian, and entered the Novitiate. However, he had to interrupt the Novitiate due to compulsory military service during the first world war, in the course of which he had to spend some years in Germany as a prisoner of war. Later on, he loved to recall how in the midst of the horrors of war he found time to make the soldiers happy with his cornet.

The war over, Brother Mantarro returned from the military camp all the more intent upon his cherished desire of consecrating his life in the Lord's service. It was amazing how a man of his age could return from the none-too fervent atmosphere of the barracks, so fervent and so spiritual. Once more he started the Novitiate, which lasted only six months for him, at the end of which he made his first vows.

Bro. Mantarro always wanted to be a missionary. He dreamed of going far out into the East to bring the saving message of Christ to those lands. His longings found their fulfilment in 1929 when he arrived in Shillong in the company of the late Fr. Albino Comba. Immediately he set himself to study Khasi. Within a short time he had a working knowledge of the language. But he used the language of the heart more than the Khasi he was able to master. In spite of all his work in Our Lady's House, where he was posted, he found time to accompany the clerics to the oratories every Sunday. His skill at the cornet and his winning smiles were enough to gain the confidence of the children and grown-ups alike, and soon he became their great friend.

At this time Msgr. L. Mathias, the then Provincial of Shillong, wanted to build a very badly needed church at Jowai, 40 miles away from Shillong. Brother Mantarro revealed himself as a builder of excellent quality. Although he had no formal training in this line, his first work showed an amazing degree of competence in construction work. This church cost him enormous sacrifices. There was no motorable approach to Jowai at the time. All the building material had to be carried on mules or by men from Shillong. Brother Mantarro was not the type of overseer that we see on construction spots to-day. He was the soul even when manual work was concerned. He carried the heavy loads with the workers, trying to tell them a good word when opportunity presented itself.

It was about this time that there occurred the great fire that destroyed the Cathedral, the Bishop's House and the house of studies for the clerics. From that heap of ashes there arose the present beautiful Cathedral; a magnificent work and a standing tribute to the architectural skill and dedicated work of Brother Mantarro. But that was not all. The fire left the mission without a house of studies for the clerics. The new house was to be constructed at Mawlai. An arduous job again; for Mawlai of those days was without an approach for motor vehicles. Added to it was the scarcity of water. But for Brother Mantarro's spirit of work, these were no barriers. Undaunted by difficulties, he brought to completion the new house at Mawlai, in spite of the fact that the work on the Cathedral was still in

progress. Besides the Catnederal and the house of formation he built eight big churches and several mission stations.

In 1940 Italy entered the war against the allies. The Italian Salesians were sent to concentration camp at Dehra Dun, but Brother Mantarro was allowed to stay on. With the departure of the Salesians, Brother Mantarro's work increased a great deal. Msgr. S. Ferrando, the then Bishop of Shillong, gives us a vivid description of a typical day of Brother Mantarro at this time. Without fail he was up very early in the morning. The first thing he did invariably on waking was to go to the church and there to draw courage and strength for the work of the day ahead from the Lord with Whom he came into contact in Holy Mass and Meditation. He spent most of the day in hard labour; construction work, marketing, seeing to the kitchen etc. But what he longed for, were the evening hours which he would spend with the boys in the oratory. He loved the boys and spent himself for them. He organised games, contests, dramas, gymnastics and most important of all—the catechism classes. To crown it all he had the night prayers and the invariably long « Good night ». And a happy Brother Mantarro it was, who betook himself for a hurried meal with the last « Khublei » of the boys still ringing in his ears. After a frugal repast, he was back in the field. This time to meet the grown-ups who could not come early. He had band practice for them, and very often religious discussions. Brother Mantarro's band contributed in no little measure to the solemnity and success of the various celebrations in the Cathedral. Brother Mantarro had a heart as big as the world to embrace everyone. His boys were greatly attached to him and he played a very substantial role in their lives. On April 10, 1971, the Italian Consul in Calcutta conferred on Brother Mantarro in the name of the Italian President the Cross « Knight of the Republic of Italy ».

Brother Mantarro always enjoyed good health and had an extraordinary resistance for fatigue. But on a certain feast day while taking part at a Pontifical Mass in the Cathedral, he suddenly collapsed and began to vomit blood. He was rushed to the local hospital and soon after removed to Calcutta where the doctors diagnosed cancer in the left lung. However they managed to remove successfully the infected lung, and Brother Mantarro was able to live again. Once out of hospital he was his old self again and for fifteen years he carried on his work as before. He had loved to bring to completion the two unfinished wings of the Cathedral. He started work and when the slab was to be cast he was forced to abandon the work. He was too weak. He was taken to Nazareth Hospital Shillong, which he himself had built. Although in hospital the work at the Cathedral was always in his mind and even two hours before his death he gave me instructions and drew some details for the workmen.

His last days were full of suffering. But his heroic patience and resignation to God's will were an example to all who went to visit him in his last days. And they were many : Salesians from Shillong and far places away from Shillong, Sisters, his dear boys, workers and a host of others for whom he was another Christ. He passed away on the 30th of July 1971, witnessing to God's love even to the very last.

In these days when much is written and spoken of fulfilment in religious life, Brother Mantarro offers us much in this regard. He found complete fulfilment in the overpowering love of Christ to Whom he gave himself heart and soul. His whole life was a manifestation of his love of Christ to the world around him, bringing numerous souls to taste this fountain of love. He did succeed in this and that was his fulfilment. Those who came into contact with him could feel the warmth of God's love emanating from him. This love found expression in long hours of intimacy with God in private visits. It was there, too, that he learned to forget himself so that he could be all things to all men.

A trait that stands out in Brother Mantarro is certainly his great humility. Here was true greatness. A man who was able to accomplish much and could, have been admired, wanted to remain unknown and unnoticed. The praises of people who knew him and the acclamations of his oratory boys left him unmoved. That remained his characteristic throughout.

As a religious, he was every bit exemplary. His poverty was conspicuous. The little room he occupied was just a crammed store-room, without any convenience. The clothes he wore were always picked from parcels of old clothes that came from Europe for the poor. His personal expenses were nil. During his 42 years of India he never went home once.

Whenever one thinks of the great amount of work that Brother Mantarro was able to do, one wonders, how it could have been done at all. Very resistant to fatigue, he kept doggedly to his work, whatever the cost. He could never say enough. It was probably this excessive work that was the cause of his cancer of the left lung. Even after the removal of one of his lungs, one could not make out that he was not a fully healthy man. He showed the same energy as before.

Although Brother Mantarro is no more with us he lives on in the hearts of so many Salesians and thousands of others. The many Churches and institutions he has built, will speak of him to us. They all speak to us not of an architect, not of a builder or organiser but of a saint. Yes, a saint who could plan and build and organize to bring men to the love that Christ came to reveal. Let me conclude with the words of Rev. Fr. V. Scuderi, former Provincial of Assam. « for me, who visited Shillong only lately, Brother Mantarro is truly a Salesian Saint, worthy of the Altar.»

My dear Confreres, Brother Santo Mantarro has gone from us, but the memory of him will live on in the mind and hearts of all who knew him. May, the shining example he set, be an inspiration to all of us, and may he help us all with his prayers before the throne of God.

Yours devotedly in D. Bosco

Fr. Mario Bianchi, S.D.B.
Secretary to the Archbishop of
Shillong-Gauhati.

NECROLOGY – **Rev. Brother Santo Mantarro**, born at Casalvecchio Siculo (Italy) 28-3-1890; died at Shillong (Meghalaya State-India) 30-7-1971, aged 81; 51 years of profession.