



Fr. Orpheus Mantovani, s.d.b.

Born at Mena di Castagnaro : October 9, 1911

Died, aged 56 at Madras : May 19, 1967

Province of St. Thomas the Apostle

Madras - India

19th July, 1967

My dear confrères,

On the 19th of May the soul of

FR. ORPHEUS MANTOVANI

left this world for eternity at the relatively young age of 56. Our Salesian Bulletin and many papers here in India and abroad have announced the death, and exalted the virtues of the one who was called the "Father of the poor, of the abandoned and the lepers." Now at the distance of two months from his death, it is possible to look at his life in a proper perspective. Let me therefore present to you the figure of this great Salesian for your edification and imitation.

Father Mantovani was born at Mena di Castagnaro on the 9th of October 1911. He entered the aspirantate of Ivrea as a "Son of Mary" in the year 1930 after having spent a few years of hard work and sacrifice to help his poor family. At the end of his aspirantate he asked to be sent to the missions, and the superiors destined him to the newly erected Province of South India. The first ten years of his life in the missions were spent at Tirupattur, the cradle of the Province. Here he finished his novitiate and philosophy after which he was appointed assistant of novices. Those of us who were under him, still remember the tough training he gave us. After his priestly ordination which he received from Archbishop L. Mathias in 1944, he was destined to the mission

of Polur as assistant parish priest. After a short period of only two years of zealous apostolic work, the superiors appointed him novice master. The four generations of Salesians formed by him, still remember with deep gratitude the thorough Salesian training they received from dear Father Mantovani.

From 1950 to 1963, he was parish priest of St. Francis Xavier's parish, Madras. It was here that Fr. Mantovani's spirit of enterprise, zeal and love for the poor began to shine forth ever more brightly. The grateful remembrance of thousands of people who received from him spiritual and material benefits, is a clear proof of the fruitful apostolate which the dear confrère carried on during these eleven years of untiring activity. Meanwhile, his health which had never been too good, began to cause some anxiety, and so the superiors sent him to Italy for some rest. Then he was asked to go to the U.S.A. to collect funds for his work and for the Province. On his return at the end of 1964, he was sent to the parish of Tambaram; and then in February 1965, he was asked to take over the new parish of Vyasarpadi, one of the poorest quarters of Madras city. He remained here just over two years. But during this short span of time, he accomplished much.

His death came suddenly and unexpectedly. In spite of his poor health, he had set for himself a heavy schedule of work which took not only his full day but also many hours of the night. The last time I met him towards the end of April, I noticed that he was rather pale, and had a tired look about him. When I pointed out this to him, he dismissed the remark with the usual answer: "I am as strong as a lion." In the last week of his life, those around him noticed that he dragged himself about with some difficulty, but he did not give up his usual schedule of work, and refused to see any doctor saying that he would soon be well. On the 19th morning he said Mass with great difficulty, and im-

mediately retired to his room. Everyone thought it was some passing indisposition, but towards midday he called for help. He was found in a pitiable condition, vomiting blood profusely. On the advice of the doctor who was called in immediately, he was given the anointing of the sick, and then rushed to a clinic. The solicitous care of the attending doctor seemed to have averted the danger, so much so that the confrères who had rushed to his bedside, returned home hopeful that everything would be well. But about 8 p.m., there was a setback. A more violent attack of vomiting made it clear beyond doubt that the case was serious. He was rushed to the General Hospital for an emergency operation, but just as he was taken down from the ambulance, he looked up at the Rector of our Seminary who was by his side, and as if consoled by the thought that he had a priest by his side, he settled back and peacefully gave his soul back to God. Mysteriously enough, at that very moment, the clock of the provincial house stopped ticking. It was 21.28.

My dear confrères, it is no easy task to give a fair idea of the natural and supernatural virtues that adorned the life of this great son of Don Bosco. But there are a few characteristics which we should not fail to stress. In the first place, there was his great love for Our Lady, Help of Christians.

Perhaps the fact that he was born in the month of October, the month of the rosary, made him feel that it was his special mission in life to spread devotion to Our Blessed Lady. The fact is he did not miss any opportunity to fulfill this mission. As assistant and master of novices, he had the novices copy in a special book the Marian Calendar, a short history of the most important feasts of Our Lady, as also anecdotes and facts about her. The universal feasts of Our Lady had to be celebrated with a small academy. He would often recall to our mind the practice of offering two mortifications daily in honour of the

Blessed Virgin, and of saying as many rosaries as possible. Nowadays, people may feel that these were exaggerations, but Fr. Mantovani's motto was: "De Maria nunquam satis." As parish priest, he made St. Francis Xavier's church a centre of Marian devotion and began publishing a monthly leaflet entitled "Favours and graces through Mary Help of Christians" which today numbers eleven thousand subscribers. He also gave an impetus to the spread of the Arch-confraternity of Mary Help of Christians, enrolling in it seventy thousand members throughout India. Both in print and in speech, the name of Mary was constantly on his lips. Her power and her intercession were the frequent argument of his sermons. A good Salesian priest who knew Fr. Mantovani intimately told me: "Fr. Mantovani is perhaps the greatest lover of Our Lady we have had in this Province, and in her name he worked real miracles." No wonder then that the heavenly Gardener came to cull this beautiful flower from this valley of tears and transplant it to the Salesian Garden during her month, and during the novena in preparation to her feast. The priest who assisted him in his last moments says that his last words were: "Mamma mia, tienimi per mano" (dear Mother, hold me by the hand), an evident invocation to Our Lady for help and assistance in the moment in which our eternity depends.

A great love for the poor is the second characteristic most prominent in Fr. Mantovani's life. Already as parish priest of St. Francis Xavier's, he had started gathering from the pavements of the city miserable and abandoned people. He bestowed on them every possible care to restore them to health. If they died, he gave them an honourable burial: and this was the more frequent case. But at least these outcasts of the south departed from this life with the consoling thought that there is still much goodness and kindness in the human heart. This work he more than doubled when he took over the parish of Vyasar-

padi where he founded the "Eight Beatitudes" Social Welfare Centre. Here he took care of the sick and the dying, the lepers and the poor. His improvised hospital was practically always full, while the dispensary was daily attended by nearly two hundred people. The leper colony has now 140 inmates, while many more come as out-patients. The elementary school which Fr. Mantovani started has over 400 children, most of them from the nearby slums. They receive not only education but also free meals everyday. Fr. Mantovani had certainly taken to heart the recommendation of Don Bosco to the first missionaries: "Take special care of the sick, of the young and of the old and of the poor, and you will win the blessing of God and the good will of men." The abundant offerings he received from all sides, the esteem of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, the many tears and manifestations of sorrow of his poor and his lepers at his funeral, are an ample proof of this. Actually Archbishop Mathias had offered Fr. Mantovani the foundation of a new parish in another quarter of the city, but Fr. Mantovani declined the offer "because there were not enough poor people there." May we Salesians always remember that we belong to the Church of the poor, and that the poor need our help and assistance much more than those of the richer class.

Don Bosco had taken the motto of his apostolate the slogan: "Da mihi animas, coetera tolle." On this point too, Fr. Mantovani was a perfect son of Don Bosco. He had an unquenchable thirst for the salvation of souls and sought them out in every possible way, at times sacrificing sleep, food and rest. I have a personal recollection of how once he went on arguing and pleading with a poor man who had strayed away from God, for several hours. It was past midnight when the man finally gave in and made his peace with God. Often he was seen touring especially the poorer areas of his parish in order to find out the

state of his parishioners. He made large use of the help of lay people in this apostolate of finding out the lapsed sheep that had strayed from the fold, and bringing them back. Here it may be appropriate to recall the keen interest evinced by Fr. Mantovani in the movement of the Salesian Cooperators. Wherever he went, one of the first things he did was to start a branch of the Salesian Co-operators and he saw to it that they were such not only in name, but in fact and deed.

Fr. Mantovani had by nature a strong and impetuous temperament. Those who lived near him know that it was hard to get along with him. He expected everyone else to keep pace with him, and that was no easy task. Fr. Mantovani could be compared to a mountain torrent which has tremendous potentialities in the swift waters that run down the valley. He harnessed these energies and used them for the glory of God, the good of souls and the social uplift of so many poor and abandoned people. Even now looking back at all what he achieved in a relatively short time and practically single-handed, one wonders from where this great Salesian got all the time and energy to accomplish it. The secret lies in his great activity and untiring spirit of work. As soon as I learned of his death, the first thought which came to my mind were those words of Don Bosco: "When a Salesian dies at his post working for souls, the congregation achieves another triumph, and the copious graces and blessings of God descend upon it."

The many letters and telegrams received from India and from abroad give testimony of the general esteem which Fr. Mantovani enjoyed. The Rector Major sent a telegram of condolence and in a subsequent letter wrote: "It is not possible for me to sing the praises of this generous Salesian. The thousands of people whom he has benefitted are and ever will be his best eulogy. They

and many others can bear witness to the generosity with which he devoted his life, drop by drop in order to live the spirit of the Gospel personified in the Good Samaritan. It may not be possible to follow all his generous resolutions and realize all his ambitious plans. But we can surely follow his example of dedication for the uplift of the poor, the needy and the unwanted by our so-called civil society." Bishop Ferrando of Shillong in a letter of condolence said: "Fr. Mantovani was the man of charity towards the poor, the sick, the most destitute ones, and we pay our homage to this hero of Christian charity." A telegram from Bishop David Marianayagam hailed him as "an extraordinary minister of Christ's charity."

Fr. Varaprasadam, S.J., Jesuit Provincial in South India, had this to say of him: "The good Father has been an admirable symbol of Christ's love of the poor and of the suffering. Your Religious Family has had the unique distinction of having had among its members this great missionary who has sacrificed himself for the people of the land of his adoption."

My dear confrères, the death of Fr. Mantovani is a great loss which we are bound to feel for years to come. As we offer generous suffrages for his dear soul, let us pray the Lord of the harvest to send to the Salesian congregation many more such apostolic souls filled with the desire of becoming all things to all men to gain all to Christ. I shall be grateful for a little prayer for me and this Province.

Sincerely yours in Don Bosco,

Fr. L. Di Fiore

Provincial