

SAN ILDEFONSO PARISH

Arnaiz St., cor. M. Reyes
Makati, Metro Manila

RIZZATO
JOHN

7, October 1991

Memory of the Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin

Dear Confreres and friends:

In the morning of September 20th around 6:00 a.m. our dear Fr. John Rizzato rested in the peace of the Lord. He had been working in the pastoral ministry till the end of his life.

He was expecting death on that day. November 19th was the death anniversary of his mother; she passed away at the age of 80. One of his brothers also passed away when he was 80. Now, Fr. John was also 80 yrs. old. He celebrated his 80th birthday on the 15th of August. On that occasion, the Mayor and Councillors of Makati granted him the honorary title of "Son of Makati" and a gold medal with the inscription "*Pinaglingkuran ang bayan*" (he has served the country).



On September 19th, Fr. Rizzato woke up in the morning and went to the sacristy for Lauds and meditation. After the recitation of Lauds, he told me: "I am not feeling well. Get somebody else to celebrate the Mass. I go to rest." And he went to his room. At one o'clock in the afternoon, he went to the Heart Center for a check-up, accompanied by Doctora Claudio. He had done that many other times.

At 7:00 p.m., while I was celebrating Mass he sent me his last written words: "Fr. Luis: I have returned back sound and healthy, but. . . tomorrow I will not celebrate Mass here nor in *Bahay Maria*, because my heart needs eternal rest. *Ang sarap ng buhay sa langit!* (How beautiful is life in heaven!)"

The next day we did not expect him

for the celebration of the Eucharist and when after the Mass, Doctora Claudio entered the room to give him the customary injection of insulin he was found lying on the floor. He had suffered cardiac arrest. His body was still warm. I gave him conditional absolution and anointed him with the Holy Oils.

On the wall, at the left of his bed, he had a written hymn for daily meditation: "Al ciel, al ciel, al ciel. . . . To heaven we are going, there I will see Mary, I will see her one day."

He had been trained at the school of Don Bosco, who strengthened his kids to live missionary lives capable of the greatest sacrifices: "A little corner in heaven will be a wonderful reward for all the sufferings endured here on earth."

At the right side of the bed he had the Blessed Sacrament. (Every Tuesday he used to say Mass for the "Paladins of Mary," his faithful friends till the last day.) At the foot of the bed he had the statue of Our Lady of Fatima. He had been trained to live in the presence of God with Jesus and Mary daily, walking actively among us in our daily lives here on earth. As he lived, so he died, surrounded by Jesus and Mary.

Fr. John Rizzato was a cheerful man, always smiling and ready to cheer-up everybody with his spirit of joy and enthusiasm; always ready for the celebration of feasts with plays and songs, flowers and incense and socials.

When visiting the sick and the dying he used to sing to them:

"Something to suffer,
something to offer.

Nothing to suffer, nothing to offer.
Plenty to suffer, plenty to offer."

In the community bulletin board he had posted the intriguing acronyms D.K.J. and M.P.H. And he readily gave the explanation whenever someone asked:

D.K.J. = Don't Kill Joy

M.P.H. = Make People Happy

Like St. Dominic Savio, he would say: "For us sons of Don Bosco, to be holy is to know how to be always happy in the presence of Jesus and Mary. What a good friends we have always in our company! Cheer up! *Ang sarap ng buhay!*"

Fr. John Rizzato kept the child-like simplicity of one who loves life, wants to be great, wants to see wonders, finds so many beautiful gifts of God in the world around, and so he is thankful and happy. He tells us: "Don't forget that my motto is '*Ama nesciri et pro nihilo reputari*' (Love to remain unknown and to be counted for nothing!) But listen: my heart is full of joy and gratitude for the Lord and Mary. They have been always very good to me, so I have to explode and give my memories. Me talk, don't talk. . . "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant."

At 80, Fr. John Ma. Rizzato still looked like the symbol of health. The strength of his handshake was enough to send shocks from head to foot. Behind this was a man of deep faith who spent 35 years of service for the residents of San Ildefonso Parish, Makati. "From my arrival in the Philippines, I have always had one assignment — San Ildefonso Parish," he used to say with a laugh.

The last of eight children, he was born in Fara Vicentino, Italy, on the feast of the Assumption, 1911. A mailman's mistake brought him into the Salesian Congregation. Not realizing that in the vicinity of Fara, there was another Maria Rizzato, (the sister of a Salesian), the postman delivered the Salesian Bulletin to little John's sister, Maria, a well-known dressmaker in the town. From the stories which his father used to read to the family on cold winter evenings, John heard of Salesian missionaries in far away lands and wanted to imitate them. Then one day the Bulletin placed a call for boys eager to become missionaries and the possibility of studying at a Salesian school for free. With his friend Nino, John decided to manifest his availability to the parish priest, who only laughed at his childlike simplicity. His father was more helpful. He contacted Fr. Angelo Rizzato and eventually both boys left for the Salesian seminary at Ivrea.

A letter from the rector asking his parents to promise that they would allow John to be sent to the missions at the end of his studies ended the dream at Ivrea. His father arrived to take him home and he was brought to Turin where he was "submerged in a sea of cheerful boys," surrounded by Salesian priests and brothers. The initial desire to be a mechanic — the reason for his going to Ivrea — soon disappeared. God's call was making itself known in a round about way.

But it was the sermon of Cardinal John Cagliero on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the send-off of Salesian Missionaries to Patagonia that electrified John. The good Cardinal's

call to the boys to imitate the young missionaries lined up at the altar rails to receive their missionary cross made him decide there and then to become a Salesian missionary.

But the journey was to be rather long. His letter to his parents expressing his missionary desire was met by a subdued, "Yes," but only after priestly ordination. "It was like a cold shower," Father John says, "but knowing that my father was an honest man, I believed and respected his decision."

Ordained a priest with 69 others, the youthful Father Rizzato also received his assignment to China the same day. He began his missionary journey on the feast of St. Luke, October 18, 1939. He left Italy with his head full of the heroic activities of many missionaries. "I asked Mary Help of Christians," he says "to help me become a martyr."

18 years of missionary activity in China passed without him receiving this grace. With the take-over by the Communists under Mao-Tse Tung, in 1949 all missionaries had to leave China. Father Rizzato found himself in Taiwan, and later in Macao. In 1956, his love affair with San Ildefonso and the Philippines began.

"It was a kind of big shanty-town surrounded by dozens of bars (houses of prostitution)," Father Rizzato wrote of San Ildefonso parish when he arrived. From 1957 to 1960 work was carried out to improve the streets and to make room for a church. Eventually, the Mary Help of Christians Center was blessed on May 21, 1961. Three days later, the construction of the church began.

But all these activities and his campaign against the “red houses” was not to the liking of someone. One morning, a grenade was planted under his jeep. Its presence was revealed to Fr. John by a phone call from an unidentified woman. “Those who placed it knew well that each morning I used to go to Don Bosco school for breakfast. Their plan was perfect. Had it not been for that woman’s call,” Father Rizzato affirms, “my craving for martyrdom would have been satisfied” adds with a loud laughter.

But he soon realized that martyrdom of another kind would be the Lord’s and Mary’s way of granting him this grace. This came in the form of diabetes which required a daily treatment with insulin. “Don’t you think that our Lady has granted me my wish?” he asks, with a firm conviction in his voice that the daily grind holds the means of salvation for all of us.

After all those years in the pastoral work, Fr. Rizzato had this to say of his parishioners: “They are good. They are simple. They are full of life and love.” As he looked ahead to his 80th birthday he added. “This is my home. After all it has been my home for the longest period of my life” (28 were spent in Italy, 18 in China, 35 in the Philippines).

A recipient of the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice Award* for his service to the Church, Father Rizzato believed very much in witnessing to his priesthood by the constant wearing of his cassock. “When the Pope goes around St. Peter’s

without his cassock,” he jokingly states, “then I will do so, too.” But his real reason was a more serious one. “I like priests to be seen in their cassocks. They become better witnesses that way.”

From September 20th, the day of his death, to the 24th when he was laid to rest in the Salesian cemetery in Canlubang, his remains lay in state in the parish church which he had built. Cardinal Sin, Bishop Lat, Bishop Gaby Reyes, Fr. Francesco Panfilo, the Provincial, surrounded by so many priests celebrated Masses during his wake and thousands of parishioners and friends attended his funeral and accompanied him to his place of rest.

Dear confreres and friends, I want to thank you for your presence, your comfort, your affection, your offering of flowers and free transportation to allow so many friends to accompany Fr. John Rizzato to the Salesian cemetery in Canlubang.

I ask of you one more favor. Let us offer for his eternal rest the fruits of the holy sacrifice of the Mass at the same altar where he used to celebrate the Eucharist. Let us pray for him where he has prayed so many times for us. Let us commend his soul to the mercy of God.



Your brother in Don Bosco

Fr. Luis Iriarte

FR. LUIS IRIARTE

Rector and Parish Priest