



REV. FR. CESARIO SERGI, S.D.B.

Died at Raghampur, West Bengal, INDIA

BISHOP'S HOUSE

Krishnagar

Nadia Dist. 741101

West Bengal, India

Dear Confreres,

"Love One Another," three short words are carved on to his tombstone to summarise the life of 77 years, one month and 11 days. Fr. CESARIO SERGI sdb. died at Raghampur (West Bengal), India, on 30th April, 1977. Death came as he sat in a chair. Died in harness, we could say. Bishop Mathew Baroi, his local ordinary, and Bishop L. R. Morrow, the former Bishop of Krishnagar, officiated at the solemn obsequies. The church that Fr. Sergi had built with untold personal sacrifice was packed to capacity: an eloquent tribute to the deceased priest and religious of the affection of his confreres and sisters whom he had helped and the people whom he had pastored for about 10 years

Cesario was born on 20th March, 1900, at Montesardo, Lecce, Italy, to Dominic and Rosa Montano. He was baptised five days later. He had a sister Antonietta who reminisces about his youth: "What I can recollect about my brother's youth is that he always had great aspirations in life. He was trained to be a shoemaker. He was fond of music and fun and frolic. He loved his job, humble as it was, as it brought in the much needed money to support our little family as well as to collect funds to build himself a cosy house and have his own little family."

"Then, one day," his sister still writes, "everything changed. He declared that he was giving up everything. Mummy was shocked. He said he would leave home and never return! Mummy and myself were bewildered at his sudden and quite unexpected decision. Gone were in a trice the dream of the cosy house and a fine little family. God had given mummy only one son and he was leaving her! I had a little sister but she had died years ago. He would come back home only once."

Something had happened quite unknown to his mother and Antonietta to make Cesario decide that way. We know it from Fr. Sergi himself. The people of Montesardo were preparing for a feast for our Blessed Mother. Cesario was second to none in his eagerness to help. He was in the Church helping to decorate the statue of the Virgin. One of those who helped Cesario was the brave father of a youngster. This father exclaimed, as if talking to himself: 'I had hoped that my son would have become a missionary. But God took him away too early. Would to God that someone take his place and become a missionary !, Those words meant for nobody were for Cesario a clear

His pastoral love had another aspect, Fr. Schilder says. He was generous to the poor and the needy. Sometimes the poor, both due to their ignorance and some malice, made extraordinary claims on his generosity. He would lecture them on being thrifty and careful. When the verbal storm was over, the victim had all he asked for. Exteriorly he was a rough diamond but with a fatherly heart which loved the people and suffered with them in their needs.

Of his religious life we know but little. But the little we know does him credit. To the women he was fatherly and yet kept his place. In his handling of money he was careful never to waste the means that Providence gave him. He had several building projects and for the most part he financed it himself writing, even when writing had become quite a sacrifice, to his friends in Europe and getting the needed. Though careful with money, he always had enough of it for the poor and the destitute and building the Church and beautifying it in right good salesian tradition. From at least one financial account he sent to his superior one gets some clear idea of the frugal personal life he led.

Fr. Luciano Colussi who knew Fr. Sergi has this to say of him : Fr. Sergi was definitely one of the greatest Salesian missionaries of India. Besides his achievements in terms of brick and stone, he has left behind a legacy of unseen achievements : his inner life was often hidden under curt and unconventional manners. Father was a man of deep spiritual life which he nourished from his closeness to the Eucharistic Lord and serious meditation on the Word of God. You saw that in his simple but convinced behaviour during religious celebrations and during personal prayer. You could sense his depth when he spoke of spiritual things, especially in his private conversations, in spiritual direction in and out of the context of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. People always liked him because he was always ready to save, never to condemn : the image of the interceding Moses (and his flowing white beard lent itself to that idea). His perseverance in doing good, even when faced with a hundred and one difficulties, was exceptional in him. Hence the people called him "*Baba*", "*Father*".

As a proof of his missionary spirit, I remember an incident : Once on our way back from a Spiritual Retreat at Sonada, he told me : 'I would like to be free from parish duties to go from village to village and preach Christ'. On another occasion when I pointed out his photo on a missionary poster and jokingly told him that he was the only missionary around to have his photo appear on a poster, he retorted : 'Don't you know that I have given every drop of my blood for the missions?' That was no flight of fancy but the humble confession of a veteran missionary who lived out in full the missionary programme of another incomparable missionary, Paul, who said that he was "all things to all men that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9 : 22).

despatched to Bandel and by 1937 he was already in Shimulia, now in Bangladesh, as Parish Priest. This meant learning a completely new language, and that too, not an easy one. From Shimulia he was shifted to Bhabarpara in 1942 till 1949 when unfavourable reports of his missionary activities roused the jealousy of someone and the then government of East Bengal requested his superiors to have him transferred. So, for sometime he was in Sonada as confessor in 1949. After 18 years he was allowed to return to Italy for a well-earned rest and holidays. Then from 1950 to 1955 he was at Ranaghat incharge of the district. For about six years following, Fr. J. Schilder recalls, he was attached to the mission station of Ranabondo but tried to bring up Bohirgachhi, a village about 12 to 14 kilometres from Chapra and then settled down for 4 years at Chapra (1960-64) and then for a brief period at Don Bosco, Krishnagar. The next three years we find him at the new mission of Azimganj among the Santals. We were just starting the work there. When Father was sent there, there was not even a house to live in. So he had to rent a not too comfortable village house where he stayed and built up the DB school and the mission.

The last ten years of his life he spent at Raghobpur or Hobibpur as is generally known. His great task there was besides caring for the parish, to build the Church, parish house and the house for the Sisters of Mary Immaculate. During this period he was plagued by the constant worry to finance and direct the projects he had in hand: add to this the discomfort of high blood pressure, his advanced age and the problems connected to the caring of the flock that was not all that co-operative. He did all this with great determination and highly commendable spirit of sacrifice.

The one dominant characteristic of Fr. Sergi's long life was his pastoral love for souls. No difficulty was too much and no sacrifice too dear to pay for his flock no matter how ungrateful they may have been and he had quite a few in his last years. It must be recalled how at Begopara he fought a court case to defend his flock. Unfortunately it was a catholic who opposed him. Father lost the case. That very night as the victorious man was returning home he quite suddenly fell dead right at the Church steps. This created a great impression on the village. Even when alone, I remember, he had to face a large and ill-intentioned crowd ready to assault him because he had converted some to the faith. He argued with them for hours until he convinced them that it was not fair on their part to harass the newly converted. Fr. Sergi was aware that education was necessary not only for the progress of faith but also for building up the whole man. He wanted all his parishioners to read and write. So a school was built and equipped and children were asked to go. It is amusing to recall how the good shepherd went after a truant little lamb who was cutting class. Father was after him. The boy barred by a pond and with Fr. Sergi at his heels jumped into the water to escape capture. Fr. Sergi dived in too to apprehend the little dodger. That was Fr. Sergi.

message. As his fingers went through the motion of decorating the statue, his mind was in a turmoil: mummy — sister — work — cosy house — his family... He tried to distract himself. No use. He could not get rid of the message that he had to be that "someone" to take the place of the youngster who died too early to become a missionary. Cesario kept on at his decoration even when others had left the Church. When he finished it was too late to go home anyway. So he slept like Samuel in the Lord's presence. When he woke up, his indecision was gone. He was sure now. He would become that missionary.

When he applied to go to Ivrea, the Salesian missionary College at Turin, he was told to produce his certificate guaranteeing that he had completed his primary school. But he hadn't. So down to books. Months passed at his books. But pass he did.

Armed with this certificate, Cesario marched off to far away Turin (Montesardo is right at the heel of Italy and Turin lies not far from the French border). There he went to the Salesian Missionary College of Cardinal Cagliero to start his studies leading to the realization of the new dream he had now. Cesario was 26 years old now and he fell in line with youngsters half his age to realize a dream. The dream was too good and too strong to dampen his spirit with thoughts of inferiority complex. So, after being at Ivrea for four years he applied on 15th August, 1929, to become a son of Blessed John Bosco in the Salesian Society. The only mark sheet (of his final exam) that has come down to us bears testimony to his great effort at his studies. On being admitted to the novitiate, he was destined for the missions of Assam, India. But before he left Ivrea, he was clothed in the clerical habit by Fr. Philip Rinaldi, then the Rector Major of the Salesians. That was on 19th September, 1929. Already on 31st December the same year Cesario began his novitiate at Shillong with Fr. S. Ferrando as his master. He made his perpetual profession on 7th January, 1934. He became a subdeacon and deacon at Bandel in 1935 and '36 consecutively and was ordained a priest in Shillong by Mgr. Ferrando on 20th June, 1936. But even during his theological studies he was asked to supervise the building of the church of the Sacred Heart at Mawlai. Fr. Cesario daily made the journey of some 5 kilometres to Mawlai from Our Lady's House on his motor bike to supervise the construction. It was a tribute to Bro Sergi for his practical sense and devotion to duty. Even though he had to shoulder this exacting extracurricular activity he never felt he was dispensed from studying his theology in all earnestness. In later years those who had all the regular time for their studies had to admit that Fr. Sergi knew as much or more than they did of the theology that they discussed. He had clear ideas.

During his seminary days he had studied Khasi to help in his apostolate. But almost before the holy Chrism on his sacerdotal hands could dry, he was

On 28th March, 1975, he wrote to Fr. Steffi of the Procure at Rome and his letter concludes both on a note of sadness and triumph: "my propaganda is going to end; my health prevents me from writing any longer to my benefactors. If you can help me, please do. We are not to belittle Divine Providence who through Don Bosco has promised us Bread, Work and Paradise. I say bread, because although there has been scarcity here, we were never in want of it. Work we had in plenty always. Now I am waiting for the fulfilment of the third promise: PARADISE. And this too shall be given if I remain faithful till the end to my vocation. I want to live and die in the holy Catholic Church and in the Salesian Congregation."

This act of faith in a Father who is provident, in a Church that is a Mother and in a congregation that nestled him close to her as a son is the spiritual legacy and testament to those of us who survive him. It is as if he hands over the torch to us to carry to others as he did.

Fr. Sergi spent quite 40 years of his life, that is, all of his priestly life in this diocese. The least we can do for all his labour and toil is to offer you this reflection on his life.

This little effort to bring to you the life sketch of a worthy missionary would fall far short of its main aim if it failed to arouse you to pay him the great debt of gratitude by offering suffrages for his dear soul and endeavour in some way to imitate the luminous example he has left behind.

And in your fraternal love have a memento for this diocese that needs more men of Fr. Sergi's calibre and the continued Divine assistance.

Yours Fraternally

Fr. Austin GUARNERI S.D.B.

For entry in the necrology:

FR. CESARIO SERGI † Raghobpur, West Bengal, India,
1977, at the age of 77.