

PROVINCE OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS,  
Gauhati, Assam, India.  
June 1st, 1967.

*Dear Confrères,*

It is with profound grief that I convey to you the sad news of the passing away of

**Rev. Fr. Constantine Bili,**

aged 54,

which took place on May 5, 1967, at the Nazareth Catholic Hospital, Shillong, India.



Fr. Bili was born at Lombardore, Turin, Italy, on September 1, 1913, of Lorenzo and Anna Ferrera. Early in his boyhood the voice of the Divine Master made itself felt in his heart, calling him to dedicate his life to the salvation of souls in the mission field. He entered the Aspirantate of "Cardinal Cagliero", Ivrea, on September 22, 1927, and there prepared himself for his future apostolate by study, prayer and a constant effort to improve himself and thus become a worthy salesian and missionary priest. On the completion of his gymnasium in 1931 he was destined to the Assam mission and set sail in November the same year. Under the careful guidance of his novice master, the then Fr. Stephen Ferrando, now Bishop of Shillong, and not without much labour, he prepared for the great day of his religious vows, which he took on December 8, 1932, at Shillong.

His frank and tenacious temperament was sometime the cause of difficulties both during his philosophical studies and during his practical training; but his great desire to become a priest sustained him more than once and he preferred to delay the date in order to arrive at the altar with proper preparation.

When the Second World War broke out he and other Italian and German confrères were interned. With them was also the then Provincial, Fr. Vincent Scuderi, under whose dynamic guidance our confrères undertook a very active and fruitful apostolate among their compatriots. Theatrical plays, concerts, band, choir, solemn religious functions and other activities, found in Bro. Bili, a good singer and cornet player, an enthusiastic helper, ever ready to sacrifice himself to relieve the monotony of camp life and do good to souls. While busy with such activities the young clerics did not lose touch with their books: taking advantage of the presence of several capable priests, they began their theological studies with regular daily classes. It was like returning to the early days of the Salesian Congregation when intense activity on behalf of youth was coupled with serious study and training for the priesthood; with one difference: the barbed wire!

Thus four years went by during which Bro. Bili gave of his best for the well-being of the internees while at the same time preparing for the great goal. His external activity was sometime misunderstood and fresh difficulties seemed to cross his path; but patient and optimistic as he was, he did not lose courage. He said to a friend: "I am prepared to wait still longer, but I won't give up: I want to be a salesian priest and missionary for ever!" He became one on December 8, 1944, together with four

other companions ordained by Bishop Cialeo, O.P., of Multan, who was also an internee. It was a day of great joy and a triumph for Fr. Bili : he had at last fulfilled his dream. A friend testifies : "His unction in saying Mass has always struck me." His usually jovial and somewhat care-free manners seemed to be sharply in contrast with his devotion and attention while he celebrated Mass. His piety was deep and drew its main strength from the Holy Sacrifice.

In October 1946 the gates of the Internment Camp were finally thrown open for him too. As he knew Hindi well, he was posted at Saharanpur, North India. When that house was closed he was sent to Dibrugarh and Doom Dooma in Assam. Subsequently, the Philosophical Studentate at Sonada and the Novitiate at Shillong had him as an active and enterprising Prefect. Later he was appointed Assistant Parish Priest of the Shillong Cathedral with special charge of the Hindi speaking parishioners.

From Shillong he was posted to the parish of Jowai as Assistant and after five years was brought back to the Cathedral as Parish Priest and Rector. But it was God's will that he should not remain there long. The symptoms of an old ailment which no doctor had been able to cure, soon showed themselves and his otherwise strong constitution was unable to resist. Soon after Easter, after a few rounds of the parish to bless houses he broke down and had to be taken to our Nazareth Hospital, efficiently run by the Sisters of Christ the King. He kept his usual calm and optimism throughout ; in fact he at first hoped to be able to return to work and carry out his many schemes for his flock. But he soon realized that God called him to his reward, and said : "I want to die here and be buried among my Christians : I know that they will pray for my soul."

The funeral proved him true. The corpse, dressed in the priestly vestments, was kept in the Grotto chapel and many of his parishioners kept the wake amid prayers and tears. They felt they had lost a father, who took an interest in all and helped all as well as he could. In fact, during the nine months that he was Parish Priest he set to study the problems of the Parish and visit every family. He set up a Co-ordinating Committee for all Parish sodalities, consulted the laity, taught singing to all the congregation in the Cathedral and began to organise other activities. "He loved and was loved in return" was the remark of H. E. Bishop S. Ferrando in his eulogy at the Pontifical High Mass.

Fr. Bili was of a cheerful nature, of great patience and optimism ; he brought joy wherever he went and thus won over the hearts of all, especially of youth. With his confrères he was a brother. At his first conference to the Salesians of the Cathedral he said : " Remember that my name is Don Bili : I don't want to be called otherwise. My first concern shall be for you ! " and he was true to his word.

He helped and encouraged, consulted and trusted them and obtained their whole-hearted cooperation in return.

The funeral was a triumph. Several thousands accompanied his remains to the cemetery, confrères and youngmen alternating in carrying the bier. Our beloved Bishop Stephen Ferrando officiated, and V. Rev. Fr. B. Tohill, of the Superior Council was among the many Salesians who took part. It was the first funeral he attended in Shillong and he was deeply impressed by the number and the piety of the Catholics. Fr. Patrick Burns, who had been a life-long friend of the deceased, and the President of the Catholic Union, gave the last farewell at the grave-side, while many wept.

Dear Confrères, while I ask for the charity of your prayers for the soul of the dear departed, I also appeal to you to beseech the Lord of the harvest to send us many other fervent apostles to fill up the wide gaps left by recent losses in this Province. Pray also for

Yours sincerely in Don Bosco,

*Fr. Mauro Casarelli,*

Provincial.

**R. I. P.**

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*For the Necrology : May 5 - Fr. Constantine Bili, born at Lombardore, (Turin) Italy, died at Shillong, India, in 1967, aged 54, after 35 years of profession and 23 of priesthood. He was Rector for nine months.*