

1957

The Late Fr. C. Vendrame, S.D.B. The Apostle of the Khasis

[In our issue of the 10th February we had published a brief notice of Fr. Constantine Vendrame, S.J., who died at Dibrugarh (Upper Assam) on the 30th of January. Fr. Vendrame was probably the greatest missionary of the present generation in India, in the line of succession to those illustrious apostles of the past, St. Francis Xavier, St. John de Britto, and his own fellow countrymen, Robert de Nobili and Constantius Beschi. During the brief period of five years we had him in our midst in South India, at Wandiwash from 1945 to 1950, he is reputed to have made not less than a thousand conversions. We are glad to be able to give more details in this sketch of the work and of the last days of Fr. Vendrame, when he completed the epilogue of suffering to his life of intense activity and prayer.]

Thirty-two years ago a young priest arrived in Shillong. His dream was complete. A few months earlier the Cardinal of Milan had ordained him in Milan. Now he was both Priest and Missionary. He had but one ambition and one yearning: to save souls. Don Bosco's motto, "*Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*" ("Give me souls; away with all things else.") he made his own, and he lived up to it right through the three decades and more of his missionary life. That it was Father Constantine Vendrame whom the Angel of Death about thirty years ago called to the great reward of apostolic labours had pre-destined him in the Kingdom of the

A Hunter of Souls

It mattered little to him what corner of God's vineyard was given him to work in. "Everywhere there is good to be done, and souls to be saved," he used to say. As it happened, most of his missionary years were spent in the Khasi Hills of Assam. From the very start he threw himself heart and soul into winning souls for Christ, and in a few years the name of Father Vendrame was a household word in almost every corner of these Hills. Few indeed are the villages where there are no Christians who can say, "It was good Father Vendrame who baptized me". It is not for nothing that he has come to be called *the Apostle of the Khasis*.

Tireless activity was one of Father Vendrame's features. He never took a holiday. He never thought of sleep or rest. As often as not, he never knew when, where and what he would next eat. "*Having food and where-with to be covered, with this we are content.*" However poor the food, however patched the covering, it did not matter to Father Vendrame, so completely had he learnt to forget himself in thinking of his Master's interests.

In all with whom he came into contact Father Vendrame saw only souls to be saved. He loved each and every one of his parishioners, but the poor and the young, the old and the sick, had a special place in his fatherly heart. He never forgot that the youth of today will be the fathers of tomorrow and so the young men of his parish were the object of his special solicitude. He never forgot that the Good Shepherd went in search of the sheep that had strayed, and never lost sight of his poor children who had gone astray. He went after them, and his patient charity brought many an erring one back to the fold. He knew the good and the not-so-good, and he made himself all things to all of them to win them all to Christ.

Man of Prayer and Penance

He laboured ceaselessly for souls, but knew full well that mere labour has but little soul-saving power. If his own labours were visibly and singularly blessed, it was because he was a man of prayer. The midnight of many and many a tiring day found him kneeling in silent prayer before the Tabernacle. On his missionary tours, his Rosary beads slipped quietly between his fingers. Even on busy thoroughfares, his union with God could almost be touched, so much so that people often remarked, "Father Vendrame has only his feet on earth."

About four months before his death this zealous missionary had to call a halt to his labours. A severe pain in the small of his back made it impossible for him to go on. For a whole month he had suffered, but had refused to succumb. He hid all his sufferings behind his usual smile, though he did look more worn out

Hospital at Dibrugarh. There it was immediately realised that his case was very serious indeed. The doctors held out very little hope of a recovery. As a matter of fact, his suffering steadily increased, so that the slightest movement meant intense pain. His agony when he was moved would draw tears from his eyes, but never a word of complaint from his lips. His Catholics and non-Catholics alike to his side. All felt that there was something extraordinary in that broken old man, and many wept to see him suffer as he did. To make matters worse, sores and blisters in his throat and mouth made it impossible for him to take any nourishment. Towards the end he spoke little, and then it was about souls and how to save them. He often thought of his parishioners. "I would not like them to see me suffer," he would say.

Sacrifices till the End

Towards the middle of January 1957 Father Vendrame was given the last Sacraments. He received them with the most edifying piety and the greatest consolation of heart. When he learnt from his Provincial, Very Rev. Fr. A. Alessi, S.D.B., that he would never rise from his bed of suffering, he had only one request: "Father, I want to die in a Salesian House. Throw me in any corner, but take me with you." Arrangements were being made for him in the Novitiate in Shillong, but God wanted even this sacrifice from His generous servant. He suddenly developed double pneumonia, and, assisted to the last by his confreres, went to his eternal reward on Wednesday, the 30th January 1957, the eve of Don Bosco's feast. "Don Bosco wants his son with him in Heaven," was the conviction in the minds of many, who knew Father Vendrame's devotion to the Founder of the Salesian Congregation, of which he was so worthy a member.

Arrangements were made to bring Father Vendrame's remains from Dibrugarh to Shillong. They arrived early in the morning of Friday, the 1st February, and were taken immediately to St. Joseph's Church in the Mawkhar quarter of Shillong, the last scene of Father Vendrame's labours as Parish Priest. Amidst the prayers and tears of his children, the good Father lay in state till about 2 p.m., when his remains were removed to the Grotto, as the little Chapel below the big Cathedral of Shillong is called. All day long, the people wept and prayed, and they touched medals and rosaries, crucifixes and pictures to his body. How could they ever forget all that they owed him in a thousand different ways?

The Cathedral was packed for the Pontifical Requiem Mass on Saturday morning. Before the Last Absolution, Bishop Ferrando's burning words reminded the congregation of Father Vendrame's zealous apostolate for souls, and his great spirit of prayer and abnegation.

The funeral was a real triumph. Shillong has never seen so many in a procession to the cemetery. There Rev. Fr. Alessi preached in English and Rev. Fr. Foglia in Khasi, but the best sermon on Father Vendrame's virtues was preached by his Christians who wept and prayed by his grave till late in the afternoon. They felt



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Rev. Phadar K. VENDRAMÉ, S.D.B.
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Since all the care bestowed on him seemed to profit him little, it was decided to remove him to the Medical

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un grande missionario

Il giorno 2 febbraio in Shillong veniva portata alla sua ultima dimora la salma del missionario salesiano Don COSTANTINO VENDRAME. Mai la città di Shillong vide un funerale così imponente per partecipazione di popolo e per il cordoglio sincero di migliaia di cattolici.

Questo umile sacerdote venne in Assam 32 anni or sono e visse sempre fedele al motto di Don Bosco: *Datemi anime e prendete tutto il resto*. Don Vendrame fu un *cacciatore di anime* per eccellenza, movendosi « quasi torrente ch'alta vena preme ». Come San Francesco Saverio, con il solo bastone in una mano e il S. Rosario nell'altra, percorse a piedi in tutte le direzioni le Colline Khasi, non curandosi del sole cocente o delle piogge torrenziali, dormendo per terra, cibandosi di quello che gli veniva offerto.

I suoi viaggi apostolici sono circondati di un'aureola leggendaria e ovunque Don Vendrame è ricordato come Eroe e Cavaliere di Cristo. La sua frase caratteristica era: « Bisogna sfondare, entrare in tutte le capanne e predicare... ». Conosceva l'arte di aprire la via, perchè nessuno poteva resistere al fascino della sua avvincente parola, corroborata da tanto spirito di sacrificio e di carità.

In una visita pastorale nel distretto del Maharan l'accogliente casa del Catechista mi aveva dato ospitalità. Si era in marcia dal mattino e solo a notte inoltrata, stanchi, affamati, potevamo sedere e rifocillarci attorno al focolare. Il Catechista ci narrò la storia della sua conversione. « Quindici anni or sono, a mezzanotte fummo svegliati dall'abbaire furioso e insolito dei cani del villaggio. Improvvisamente una voce fuori della capanna si fece udire: " Per carità, un posto per passare la notte! ". Tutti erano spaventati; nessuno fiata. A me quella voce non risuonò nuova: l'avevo già udita su di un mercato a predicare. Ebbi compassione: aprii e Don Vendrame entrò. Donde veniva? Come mai a quell'ora? Da quanto tempo camminava? Dio solo lo sa. Quando raggiunse, verso mezzanotte, il villaggio, tutte le capanne avevano le porte sbarrate e alle sue suppliche rispondeva l'abbaire ringhioso dei cani. Stette con noi tutto il giorno, ci parlò del Signore Gesù, visitò altre case, e noi tutti vedemmo in lui l'uomo di Dio. Per questo decidemmo di farci cattolici... ».

Così ebbe inizio la conversione di quel villaggio, allora tutto pagano.

Quanti di questi episodi potremmo contare! Don Vendrame non teneva nulla per sé: i vestiti che indossava erano regali di confratelli o di persone generose; tutto quanto aveva distribuiva in carità; la sua felicità era immolarsi per gli altri e circondarsi di fanciulli come Nostro Signore. Era uno dei suoi segreti per annunziare il Cristo: farsi precedere dai fanciulli come da araldi. Sapeva guadagnarsi il cuore dei piccoli e per mezzo loro entrare nelle famiglie.

Un male insidioso minava da lungo tempo la sua forte costituzione. Ma egli seppe nascondere, e con ferrea volontà continuò a lavorare, finchè il male ebbe il sopravvento ed egli dovette cedere e farsi portare alla casa del Vescovo e porsi a letto. Il riposo, l'unico che si era concesso in 32 anni, gli giovò alquanto. Dopo 15 giorni, volle alzarsi per essere presente alla visita pastorale del Vescovo nella sua parrocchia di Mawkhar



SHILLONG (Assam-India) - Il compianto Don Vendrame con S. E. Mons. Ferraro tra cattolici Nepalesi.

in Shillong. « Una cosa sola è necessaria — diceva — lavorare per le anime ». E ritornò alla sua parrocchia per un giorno, lavorando come se nulla fosse da mane a sera, anzi fino a notte inoltrata. Vi furono prime comunioni, cresime, accademia e teatro, e mai Don Vendrame parve così felice. Poi con le lacrime agli occhi partì. Lo portarono lontano, lontano, all'Ospedale di Dibrugarh, che dista 500 chilometri. Quando ritornò, dopo 30 mesi di sofferenze continue (aveva l'artrite ossea con altre complicazioni che lo inchiodavano a letto come Nostro Signore in croce) era cadavere e fu accolto non più da inni festosi, ma da un pianto universale.

Da degno figlio di Don Bosco era caduto sul campo del suo lavoro, fedele fino all'ultimo alla sua vocazione di sacerdote, di missionario, di salesiano.

di STEFANO FERRARO
Vescovo di Shillong