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Fr. Francis Zannini, S. D. B.,  
born - Italy, Aug. 22nd 1911  
died - Abadan, Iran, May 30th  
1977

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SACRED HEART CHURCH,  
ABADAN, P.O.B. 77,  
IRAN.

Dear Confreres and friends,

Father Zannini is dead! From one end of Khuzistan to the other everyone knew Fr. Zannini. He had gone prematurely grey many years ago, but even his white hair was part of the attraction that made him an unforgettable character. He was of average height, extremely handsome in his younger days, with a kindly smile and cheerful word for everyone. In fact in recent years he was benevolence personified: the sort of figure that should have gone with a mitre or a coronet. He was eminently fatherly. Many years after he had left Abadan, after his first stay here, people would still be asking about him. He certainly had a natural charm, an inborn nobility: he was what one used to call in "the old days" - a born gentleman. He was also very intelligent; spoke excellent English and an impeccable Italian, as well as French and Spanish and the languages he had learnt in India, yet I feel that Fr. Zannini's special 'charisma' was his personality, his charm. He was a brilliant conversationalist, yet he was more at home at the typewriter or at his desk preparing books for publication or translating books. He really ought to have been the editor of a newspaper, or the director of a publishing firm or the librarian of some famous library.

This does not take anything away from him as a priest. He was a good priest and zealous. Wherever he had worked, people spoke highly of him: from Cairo to Beirut, from Abadan to Tehran and from America back to Abadan again. I am sure he has been instrumental in winning many souls for God. Two of my very good friends owe their conversion to Catholicism to Fr. Zannini, but there are many others I am sure whom God alone knows.

Apart from an accident when he fell while Parish Priest of the Consolata Church, Tehran, shattering into innumerable pieces his shoulder bone, he was never ill. He even made a remarkable recovery from that accident for a man touching his sixties. We all thought he would bury us, and live to a venerable old age. Yet suddenly on the feast of the Pentcost in the afternoon he began to feel ill. Obviously he had chest pains, as he was walking around with his hand over his heart. I wasn't in Abadan, but, nearly 700 kilometers away in Bushehr, as this is a vast parish, and the new priest, Fr. Vito, had no experience of sickness of this nature, nor the authority to make Fr. Zannini see a doctor. Fr. Zannini did not feel well enough to say the 6.15 pm Mass, but he assisted at it from a door leading on to the Sanctuary. He would not go to bed.

Immediately afterwards Fr. Vito had to leave for Khorramshahr 20 kilometers distant, to celebrate the Mass at 7.30 pm. It was 9.30 p.m. when he returned with Dr. D'Souza, a past pupil, who brought with him the machine to take an electro cardiogramme. It showed evidence of a heart attack. Eventually they were able to get an ambulance and get him to hospital, where he was put in the Intensive Care Unit on a drip. He looked peaceful. The doctor persuaded Fr. Vito to return home and come back in the morning, but at 2.30 a.m. he had a second heart attack, a massive one, from which he never recovered.

It was late at night when I got the news, and it was almost miraculous that I did, for I was at the air base at Bushehr. Fortunately I was able to return by plane the next day. Fr. Picchioni and Fr. Tignonsini and Fr. Martinelli were there from Tehran, when I arrived just in time to be principal celebrant for the solemn requiem in the parish church. It had already been decided to bring Fr. Zannini to Tehran for burial. The following day (Wednesday) I had to see to all the formalities. And the day after (Thursday) he was brought by plane to the Don Bosco College Chapel. The next morning, Friday the Public holiday, the solemn requiem Mass was held. The Nuncio, Archbishop Bugnini, was there with most of the priests and nuns of Tehran, and the Armenian Bishop, the only Bishop in Tehran at the time. Both Fr. Picchioni, the Rector, and the Nuncio both gave the eulogy on Fr. Zannini. He was buried in the Catholic cemetery in Tehran along with

the other Salesians who have died in Iran.

Fr. Zannini was born on August 22nd 1911 in Campolongo del Brenta, Treviso, Italy. He was of a good Catholic family. He spent most of his childhood and youth in Venice, for he always considered himself a Venitian. It seemed his first intention was to join the secular Clergy, but he switched from the junior seminary to a Salesian missionary college, and left for India as a novice at 19 years of age.

He was outstanding in his group, the first to get a B.A. Honours Degree in English. He spent most of his time teaching the young Salesians English, many of whom were English or Irish. On May the 24th 1939 he was ordained in Sonada, Bengal, India. He spent some time as a newly ordained priest in our mission in Assam. In 1940 when Italy entered the war he was interned with the other Italian Salesians. Internment could have had a disastrous effect particularly on our young Salesians. But Fr. Zannini was one of those who organised the group into a real Salesian Community. The young Salesians continued their studies and they were all apostles among the civilian internees. Some were even ordained in the Camp. When the war was over the attitude towards foreign missionaries changed. The British subjects, of course, had to be allowed to remain. But many of the Italians were refused re-entry visas, when they left India for home leave. Among these was Fr. Zannini. He was still a missionary at heart, so he joined the Middle East Province in 1950.

He taught English in the 'Liceo', the high school, of the Instituto Salesiano in Cairo, but he was also chaplain to two English speaking communities of nuns and their respective schools, the Immaculate Conception Convent School and the Good Shepheard Convent School. He was held in very great esteem. I followed his footsteps two years later and I can vouch for it. His next assignment was our new school in Beirut in 1952. While there he founded the Anglo-American section which became the most prosperous.

In 1957 he was sent to Abadan and a couple of months later became the Parish Priest after Fr. Tyson left. Fr. Tignonsini was appointed Rector. However, three years later this anomolous situation was lifted and he was appointed the first Rector and Parish Priest. He held this position during the boom time in Abadan when there were at least 600 expatriates working in the Refinery and even more in the oil fields around, by 1963 the numbers were going down and the Industry was becoming more and more Iranianised. In 1964 he became the Provincial Economer. He held this position till 1968, when he went to the Consolata Church in Tehran as Parish Priest.

In 1973 he became part of an exchange deal between the Western Province of the United Sates and the Middle East Province. They sent Fr. Mc Loughlin to be Head Master of the Anglo-American school in Beirut and Fr. Zannini went to California. There his work was mostly in Parishes, principally SS. Peter and Paul's, San Francisco, but he

did a lot of mission appeals for the Salesians, and in this way covered most of the United States, meeting many of his old parishioners from Abadan. He also did a spell of Parish work in Canada.

However, he was still nostalgic for the Middle East province especially Abadan. Fr. Mc Loughlin had already returned to the United States, so the deal no longer held. Thus two years later he returned to Abadan in December 1975. He was in such excellent health and good form that we thought we had him for years but no one knows the designs of God. Thus Fr. Zannini was called to reap the reward of a full life of apostolate on May the 30th 1977. His death will be mourned by many, and all who knew him, and they were many, will never forget him. Please pray for the repose of his soul and this small community which has so much work in such a vast area and can ill afford to lose a priest like Fr. Zannini.

Yours fraternally in Don Bosco

*F. Francis Mulligan S.D.B.*

Fr. Francis Mulligan, SDB.  
RECTOR & PARISH PRIEST

DATA FOR THE NECROLOGY:

FR. FRANCIS ZANNINI

Born on August 22nd, 1911 at Campolongo, Treviso, Italy

Died in the 67th year of his age on May the 30th 1977  
in Abadan, Iran, in the 47th year of his profession,  
in the 38th year of his Priesthood. He was a Rector  
for 12 years and 4 years Provincial Economer.