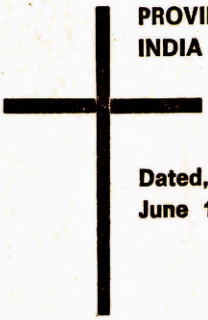

PROVINCE OF GAUHATI,
INDIA

Dated, Gauhati,
June 1, 1970

Dear Confreres,

As you have already learnt from papers or other sources, the hands of assassins have deprived us of one of our zealous missionaries in the person of

Fr. GIULIO COSTA

aged 68.

His body was found in a pool of blood in the verandah of his residence on the morning of April 17, 1970. It was only in the afternoon that the first confreres, living at Tura, forty miles away, could reach the spot and take care of the remains.

After the post mortem at Tura, the body was carried to Shillong, – a distance of 200 miles – for the burial. The funeral took place on Sunday, 19th, afternoon, and was an imposing demonstration of the shock and sorrow which Catholics and non-Catholics felt at the tragic death of a well-known and beloved person. His Grace Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario pontificated and delivered the funeral oration, in the presence of Bishop O. Marengo, of a minister and other high functionaries of the Government and a very large crowd of people. The Chief Ministers of Assam and Meghalaya sent their condolences to the Archbishop.

Although the authorities were quick to start investigations, it took them nearly two months to arrest the culprits and find that theft was the motive of the murder.

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Fr. Giulio Costa was born at Imola, Bologna, Italy, on November 11, 1901. He was a Government school teacher when he heard the call of the Master and joined the Cardinal Cagliero Missionary College at Ivrea, Italy, in October 1924. A year later he left for Assam, India. He did his novitiate at Shillong, the capital of the Assam Province of British India, his Novice-Master being the then Fr. Stephen Ferrando. He took his first vows on January 6, 1927. The following year he began his theology and was ordained a priest on April 26, 1931. During his theological studies he was also part-time secretary to Mgr. Mathias, then Prefect Apostolic of Assam and Provincial. It was during these years that, encouraged by his Superior, he began to take an interest in the tribes of the area. He was subsequently Prefect of the growing Don Bosco Technical School, Shillong, until early in 1936 he was appointed secretary to Mgr. Ferrando, newly elected Bishop of Shillong. In February, 1939, he arrived at Tura, Garo Hills, as Assistant Parish Priest and there began his real missionary career. After ten months' study of the Garo language, he undertook his first missionary tour. It lasted 35 days, during which he walked 287 miles, heard 420 confessions – the Catholics were still few – and administered 101 Baptisms. When he returned he was compelled to go to bed with dysentery and malaria. He had not yet recovered when he was made Parish Priest of the whole District. The second World War had in the meantime broken out and that added considerably to the difficulties of his mission. Speaking to a confrere, he described that period as one of toil and humiliations.

In 1950 he returned to Italy for the first time since his arrival in India. While at home he received an invitation to visit the Anthropological Institute of Friburg and deliver a lecture, which he did. The Institute later published his work on Garo Law.

In 1953 he was transferred back to the Khasi Hills and worked as Assistant Parish Priest in the parishes of Shillong Cathedral and Marbisu, was Prefect of the Novitiate and finally went back to the Garo Hills in 1964, this time in charge of the thousands of refugees, many of them Catholics, who had crossed over into India from Pakistan the previous year. His life was henceforward dedicated to the refugees. When, through the Salesian Superiors, the offer came from Turin of help to set up a permanent social centre, he was the only one who accepted the invitation to undertake the

task. It meant living practically alone in the jungle, with but a few huts a little distance away, and no other mission station near-by. He got down to his work with enthusiasm and was about to reap the fruits of it when he was struck down. A few weeks before his death, during a visit to Shillong he confided to Fr. J. Foglia that he was determined to carry on his work to the end in spite of enemies who were ready to take his life. He never disclosed who those enemies were. He kept a gun close to his bed and there it was found after his tragic end, loaded with dust!

Throughout his missionary career Fr. Costa, as he himself confessed, had a passion for anthropological research and would have gladly given the whole of his time to it. In the midst of his pastoral work he never lost sight of it. Though he was not a trained anthropologist, he yet possessed an absorbing interest in the subject, coupled with a keen power of observation and patient perseverance in field work and study.

Early in the thirties he planned a series of books on the Khasis. He prepared the first two himself and they were published in 1936 and 1937. Later on, as he went round the Garo or Khasi villages, he collected a vast amount of first-hand information which he set down in writing during the long rainy days at home. During the years 1958-62 he had the opportunity of editing all the material thus collected and composed two voluminous type-written works, one on the Garos and one on the Khasis. He has also left short accounts of the life and customs of 38 other tribes of Eastern India and a large collection of rare photoes.

As a man, Fr. Costa was a person of broad views, bold plans and untiring activity. He was frank and sincere in his dealings and exemplary in the fulfilment of his religious and priestly duties. He was especially remarkable for his assiduity at the confessional.

In conclusion, while I ask you, dear confreres, to pray for the repose of the soul of our dear departed, I also earnestly request you to remember this Province in a very special manner.

Yours sincerely in Don Bosco,

Fr. Mauro Casarotti,

Provincial