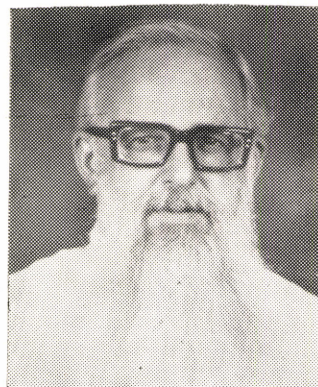


SALESIAN PROVINCIAL HOUSE
CITADEL MADRAS 600 010
INDIA



FATHER SANTO DI VITA

A great, short Salesian Missionary in India

BORN AT EDNA (SICILY) on 16.4.1914

DIED AT KATPADI (INDIA) on 29.7.1983

On July 29, 1983, as Fr. Di Vita said mass at 5.00 p.m. for the sisters of the Cheshire Home, Katpadi, he never imagined it would be his last. The greater part of the early afternoon he had spent with Bro. Joseph Das, the Headmaster of Don Bosco Higher Secondary School, making arrangements for his 50 boarders to join the Don Bosco boarders for the film on Mahatma Gandhi the next day in Vellore. After the mass returning to the presbytery, he worked with his boys, who studied during the day in Don Bosco, Gandhi Nagar, helping them to stack the firewood he had bought the previous day. He had some uneasiness in his chest.

Later he assisted the boys at their bath. As everywhere else, there was acute shortage of water, and he had to regulate the use of the water from the well. He clapped for water to be poured, he clapped again for applying soap, and would clap again for washing off the soap! To the sister who had come during the bath to ask him about Mass the next day, he said wryly, rubbing his chest, "I'll let you know. Now, if I don't give them the clap, they will not be able to wash off the soap!" With the boys' faces covered with lather, it looked like carnival! He laughed.

He was not feeling too well. He called the supervisor of the boys and told him, that he was unusually tired. "I will go to the room and rest. Look after the boys and their supper," At 7.45 p.m. he went to a doctor, who gave him an injection, thinking that it was some gastric trouble.

It was 8.00 p.m. He did not feel like eating. "Put the bed out and let me sleep." Two boys lifted the bed, and Father Di Vita went to the wash place. The boys then heard him crashing over the metal bucket in the W. C. and rushed in. He had collapsed on the floor. They rang up frantically to the nearby St. Joseph's Home. The Rector, Fr. Augustine, rushed to the Parish. Meanwhile, the Cluny Sisters who ran an aged peoples' home, were trying to revive him. The Doctor too came. But Father Di Vita had already gone to his reward! He had had a massive heart attack.

A missionary vocation

Born on April 16th, 1914, at Villa Rosa (Edna) in Sicily, Italy, of good christian parents, Liborio and Salvatrice Di Vita, he had a passion for the missions from early childhood. Directed by his parish priest, he joined the Salesian Missionary aspirantate of Gaeta, Italy, on 24.11.1930. He was 16. A pre-aspirantate report says: "Rimase sempre in famiglia. Frequento le elementari, e poi e servito in casa l'arte del barbiere. Era assiduo alla chiesa." (He always stayed at home. He has done his elementary school studies and later took to hair-dressing. He was very interested in the Church.)

Privileged to count the hairs of His Grace's head.

Chosen for the Indian Salesian Mission, he landed in India on January 7, 1935. He made his novitiate at Tirupattur 1935 - 36, with Very Rev. Fr. Joseph Carreno as the Master of novices. It was followed by Philosophy for two years at Tirupattur itself. He did his practical training as Assistant and Teacher in the Middle School there. He was not a very brilliant student. Nor had he other extra-ordinary gifts like acting, singing, or athletics. He was small in stature. But he was a good hair dresser. He had the singular privilege of being the hair cutter of Mgr. Louis

Mathias! His attention to details and finesse, made him very good at the Sacred Liturgy and the ceremonies. As a result, he became the teacher of liturgy and ceremonies during the second year of his philosophy!

A peg in a hole, square or round

In 1941, still in Tirupattur, he began his theology; but war had broken out, and Santo and companions were whisked off to the concentration camps at Deoli and Dehra Dun. It was a sad sobering experience for the young theologian. After three years of the camp life, he was ordained priest on 11-10-1945 by Mgr. Louis Mathias, his client at the hair dressing chair! For eight years thereafter, "he was at the disposal of the Superiors like a peg, ready to fill up any hole, square or round," as one of his companions humorously puts it. He was assistant parish priest at Chetput for one year; the Prefect of Studies of Dominic Savio, Tirupattur. At Koviloor, he was Assistant Parish Priest, 1947 and 1948. Later, he was the Prefect of the Refuge, in Madras for two years; again Asst. Parish Priest at Arni; finally, he came as Prefect of Studies to Don Bosco Orphanage in Vellore.

The silent apostle

In 1953, he was appointed Parish Priest of Uriurkuppam. In those days Uriurkuppam was the end of the world, without communication of amenities. He was there for 18 long years. It is there he proved himself a priest for the poor, and a lover of the missions. He looked after the spiritual welfare of the village and sub-stations, and looked after the spiritual needs of the Sagayathottam Salesian Farm as well. Few people knew him outside the village. He did his work quietly, without fanfare. He had his joys and sorrows; and his physical ailments too.

A monument to the Madonna.

He then came suddenly to the limelight, because of his projected church for his village, Uriurkuppam. "Far too big for such a small place!", critics quipped. But little did people know the large heart of Fr. Santo and his great love for the Madonna! But his people knew it. As a matter of fact, there was an impassioned appeal from the villagers of Uriurkuppam to rest his mortal remains in that church. But it was decided differently. In 1971 he was transferred to Pavithram, as its first Parish Priest. He worked there with the poor for 8 years. From Pavithram he came to Katpadi, to the beautiful church of the Blessed Sacrament. His health was no more so good. But he seldom complained. He did not have many parishioners. But he attended to the spiritual needs of all the Salesian Houses nearby. On top of it he started a boarding for about 50 boys who

could not find place in any of our boardings! He had very little place. But what he had, he shared with the boys.

"These things happen, don't worry!"

The 17th July, was the Parish Feast of the Blessed Sacrament. Single-handed he had organized this parish feast, and the triumphant procession of the Blessed Sacrament. Something curious had taken place that day which, in retrospect, would throw some light on his eventual death and his being prepared for it. Don Bosco Boarding is a sizeable part of his parish flock, almost three hundred. There was some misunderstanding regarding the time of the Concelebrated Mass with the Bishop in the St. Joseph's Tech. Campus. Don Bosco had to supply the choir and the brass band. But they were late by half hour! When they reached the spot the Bishop was already at the homily. It was embarrassing for everyone. But Santo took it all in the stride and said: "These things happen. Join in. Don't worry." That was certainly an exercise in patience! But one could see that he was very, very tired. He was on the reserve!

A brother priest to the diocesan clergy

The death was sudden, and there was no one around. The Bishop was not in station, and Fr. Provincial was not in Madras. The diocesan fathers would not hear of any burial till every parish priest of the diocese had come to hear of the untimely demise of dear Fr. Di Vita, who had served the diocese for over 45 years; and, if possible, be able to take part in the final exsequies either in Katpadi or Tirupattur. Hence it was decided to keep the body for two days.

The Bishop lays to rest Fr. Santo Di Vita.

On the 1st August, at 7-00 a.m. there was concelebrated Mass at Katpadi in a packed church, presided over by the Vicar General. Later, the body was driven to Tirupattur, the cradle and final resting place of many Salesians.

There, Rt. Rev Michael Augustine, Bishop of Vellore, concelebrated Mass with one hundred priests for the repose of 'Santino', with a large concourse of people. It was a tearful, but triumphant end of a life spent in single-hearted service of the poor in the missions. Fr. Vanathayan, the Parish Priest of Santhavasal, spoke after the mass, about the deceased, as man, priest and missionary. Later at the grave, Fr. Francis Schlooz, one of the early companions of Father Di Vita, gave a fitting farewell to his friend whom he called endearingly; "Santo, the great short man." Fr. Di Vita was only four feet six! Fr. Schlooz prayed with these significant parting words: "May Santo's soul rest in peace!" Amen.

FR. JOHN PETER SATHIARAJ
Provincial