



REV. FR.

CAJETAN GUIDOTTO

S.D.B.



With the Christians



▲
Fr. Guidotto
with Sr. Emma, F.M.A.
and his dear
and near ones
▼



With Mother Teresa



With Fr. Peter Schiavon



FR. CAJETAN GUIDOTTO SDB

(1921-1999)

Introduction

To come to know the truly exceptional qualities in a person, one must have the good fortune to observe them over a long period of time. If in the process no trace of egoism is found; if the guiding principle is unparalleled love and generosity, if it is certain that there is no thought of recompense, then there can be no mistake. For those who came into close contact with Fr. Guidotto during the long forty eight years that he spent in India, it was indeed a good fortune to have known one of the finest and gentlest Salesian missionaries in Northeast India who passed away, after a massive heart attack, on 28th July 1999, at Woodlands Nursing Home, Shillong. He was seventy eight.

His mortal remains were laid to rest at Laitumkhrah cemetery on 30th July 1999. The funeral Mass at the Shillong Cathedral which was packed to capacity and overflowing and the presence of over hundred priests and several hundred more sisters and the touching scenes at the cemetery speak volumes about Fr. Guidotto who was able to touch and transform the lives of people through his amiable qualities and unassuming ways. He was the personification of love and tenderness and the perpetual smile writ large on his face would be missed by the people of Shillong. I deem it my privilege to offer you through these pages a glimpse into the extraordinary and inspiring life of this 'man of God' who lived totally for others.

Early Life

Fr. Cajetan Guidotto, affectionately called Fr. Gui, was born on 24th May 1921 at Gardigiano-Scorze, Venice in the diocese of Treviso, Italy. His parents were Luigi Guidotto and Amalia Carraro, who had eight children, five girls and three boys, among whom Cajetan was the third. The early upbringing in the family where unity, love and mutual support reigned, in spite of grinding poverty, helped to shape the future amiable missionary. At the age of four Cajetan took so ill due to a severe blood poisoning that the doctors give up all hope of his survival, but not his saintly mother. She told the doctor, "I'll take him to another doctor - to St. Antony of Padua." The doctor of Padua



indeed cured the boy and the mother in turn told the son that she was offering him to God. "You belong to the Lord and not to me any more." The words of his loving mother left a deep impression on his young mind and the seed of vocation was planted. When he was only ten years, his mother passed away and their aunty took her place.

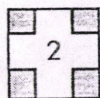
Financial hardships at home compelled Cajetan to take up work at a young age to earn a living and support himself in his studies. Seeing his zeal for study and knowing his desire to become a priest, his eagerness to help, was providentially directed to place Cajetan in the Salesian School at Mogliano Veneto. While at school he came into contact with a saintly Salesian, Fr. Mateo Rigoni, who was his confessor and to whom he made known his desire to be a missionary and sought guidance to join a congregation. "You are already with the Salesians," Fr. Rigoni told him and took up the matter with the Rector of the house and was accepted as an aspirant.

Son of Mary

Cajetan entered the Salesian aspirantate at the age of seventeen in 1938. At a time when boys were entering the junior seminary when they were eleven or twelve, Cajetan was considered as a late vocation and hence qualified to be selected under the 'sons of Mary' project of the Salesians. Being born on the feast of Mary Help of Christians, he always considered himself to be one who enjoyed the special predilection of Mary. When he received the news of his admission to the aspirantate he ran home to communicate the news to his father. In his youthful enthusiasm he shouted, "Papa, I am a son Mary," to which his father replied, "What? You are son of Amalia!" But when his father understood what his son meant, he gave his blessings and stood by him all throughout the years of his formation to priesthood offering support and strength.

Formative years for Salesian Life and Priesthood

On 14th August 1940 Cajetan entered the noviciate at Este to begin his long years of formation to Salesian life and priesthood.



In this event too there was powerful intervention of Divine Providence. The Second World War had broken out and compulsory military service was imposed on all; but because of a critical condition brought about by a burst

appendix he escaped conscription. Because of his age, his missionary enthusiasm and in order to avoid being enlisted in the army, he was allowed to begin his noviciate. There were 44 novices belonging to the province of Venice with Giuseppe Manzoni as the novice master. He made his profession on 16th August 1941, the birthday of Don Bosco.

For philosophy Cajetan was sent to Brescia in Lombardy where he was fortunate to have his novice master as rector. The war brought about severe economic hardships everywhere and some of his companions died due to food shortage and malnutrition while many others contracted tuberculosis. It was indeed a preparation for tough life in Assam missions in the future. He went through his philosophy studies successfully but flunked in Greek. Interestingly, on his arrival in India, he became the teacher of Greek to Fr. Sngi Lyngdoh, who later became the author of the monumental first Greek-Khasi Dictionary !

In 1943 Bro. Cajetan was sent to Tolmezzo on the Austrian border for his practical training. The war there was so intense that the Salesian college was taken over by the military and turned into a hospital. During that time he and other Salesians went around the villages and helped the people till the war ended and the college was returned to them.

He did his theology at Monte Ortone near Padua and at the end of his theological studies he was ordained a priest on 29th June 1950, the Holy Year, at Padua by the Capuchin Bishop Bortignon. The next day he celebrated the First Mass in his village and attended a grand feast in his honour.

A Missionary in the Making

The stories brought back from the missions by the visiting missionaries fascinated him and strengthened his resolve to opt for the missions. It was during his theology days that Cajetan made his formal application to be sent to the missions. The Rector Major, Fr. Renato Ziggotti, asked him to be ready to go only after the ordination since getting the visa was a problem. The long awaited letter from the Mission Superior, Fr. Bellido, came on 21st June 1950, as he entered into the retreat in preparation for the ordination. He was destined for the Assam missions. He found out from geography books that Assam was in British India and immediately began praying for his new mother land.



At the end of the festivities following his First Mass in the village he broke the news that he would be leaving for Assam in India as a missionary. The family members found that Assam was on the other side of the globe from Brazil where a sister of the new missionary, Salesian Sister Emma, was working. The Parish Priest, urged on by Luigi Guidotto, wrote to Fr. Bellido to see if the new priest-missionary could not be sent rather to Brazil. The Mission Superior offered the possibility of a change. But Fr. Cajetan turned down the offer choosing to accept the first proposal of the superiors as indication of God's will for him. Brazil's loss was India's gain.

Passage to India

It took months before the new missionary-priest could set sail for India. Getting the visa for India took a long time and then finding a place on a ship for India was another hurdle to cross. The waiting period was spent helping the Holy Year pilgrims at the Catacombs in Rome and at the Missionary Youth Office in Turin. In the meantime Bro. Pancolini was entrusted with the task of teaching the young missionaries English while veteran Fr. Vigada was to give practical norms for apostolic missionary life. Writing to the Provincial of Assam Fr. Guidotto pledged his filial obedience to his new superiors and promised to give whatever he could as a poor contribution to the mission of Assam. The permission to enter India came on 1st December 1950 and on 24th December he set sail for India on a cargo ship from Trieste.

The journey lasting over a month was full of interesting events which Fr. Gui carefully recorded in two diaries. In the same ship there were three FMAs among whom was Sr. Nellie Nunes, who later became the first novice mistress of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians. Before setting sail when they realised that they would be without Mass for a month they had begun a novena in honour of Blessed Mary Mazzarello (who at that time was not canonised) asking for a miraculous intervention. Their prayer was answered. One of the passengers cancelled his trip and Fr. Gui got that place. The sisters had Mass every day and as for Fr. Gui a speedy passage to India. They arrived at Bombay on 28th



January 1951 and on reaching Calcutta, Fr. Gui was met by Fr. Pianazzi, the provincial who sent him to Sonada to learn English and to prepare for the confession examinations.

A Front-line Missionary

His English lessons in Sonada were cut short when he was asked to go to Golaghat parish in Assam to help Fr. Mellino. The village tours brought him down with cerebral malaria and the doctors at the Baptist hospital advised that he be sent back to Italy at the earliest. They thought that he had become mentally affected. Their observation was based on the fact that they had found him, a Catholic Priest, attending Baptist prayer meetings in the hospital and going around consoling the sick. Providentially the superiors did not listen to the doctors. He was sent back to Sonada to recuperate and then from there he was sent to Don Bosco Shillong (1953-59) to be in charge of the aspirants and to look after the health of the community. He became a loving and caring infirmarian and the boys affectionately called him "Fr. Doctor."

The next appointment was to Mawlai parish as its Parish Priest (1959-66) and sickness trailed Fr. Gui again. He had to undergo operation for the kidney twice and in 1966 Bishop Ferrando sent him to Jowai Parish for a six months rest as his personal doctor, Dr. Tunell, was posted in Jowai. Fr. Gui recalled that the six months of rest resulted in the most memorable 13 years of his missionary life in Jaintia Hills. He reached remote areas covered now by the parishes of Namdong, Khliehriat, Sutnga and Ummulong.

In 1979, seeing his health condition, Fr. Gui was asked to come over to Sunnyside as confessor. He remained there till 1982. Then for a short period he was sent to Cherrapunji as Asst. Parish Priest. In 1984 he came over to Mawlai parish, first as Asst. Parish Priest and then as acting Parish Priest for a year. It was a time for renewing old pastoral contacts. In 1987 he was asked to go to the Noviciate Community as confessor. When Fr. Virgil Albera, parish Priest of Upper Shillong passed away, Fr. Gui was given the responsibility of an Acting Parish Priest. In 1990 he was back in Mawlai, at the Sacred Heart College as confessor. He was later assigned for a short time to Don Bosco Youth Centre. This made it easier for him to visit the sick in Nazareth Hospital more regularly. From Early 1994 till his death he was in Sunnyside as confessor.

Lover of Souls

Fr. Gui's desire was to become all things to all men so that he may save some at any cost; and I still do this, for the sake of the Gospel, to have a share in its blessings.



(Cfr I Cor.9,22) His only preoccupation in life was to gain souls for Christ. Even years after he left the Jaintia Hills he never forgot the people whom he had visited during his missionary journeys. In 1993 with the help of Fr. Sngi he wrote a letter to the people there reminding them of the promise they had made to him many years earlier about entering the Church. The letter was indeed a master stroke in evangelization methodology. He wrote: "I still remember your promise - your word of honour - to enter the Catholic Church as soon as you would have finished the sacrifice for your parents who have died. Yes! I remember your promise. However, I have been away from Jowai since several years and I am unable to come to you. I really wanted to come to you to help you fulfil your promise. But I am unable to do so due to my ill health. I can no longer walk with ease. My legs are heavy. I walk dragging my feet along. My eyes are also growing weak. To climb even small hillocks, I am totally unable. My entire body is sick and I am forced to take rest. I am moving around slowly like a snail. Even to travel by vehicle is not possible. The doctors do not allow me to go about here and there. But, there is still an intense desire to come to you. Since I am unable to do so, I am sending you Fr. Sngi, who is a son of our soil.... Receive him as though you are receiving me." Fr. Sngi confesses that the letter had a great impact on the people and in the two and a half years he spent among the people during his week-end ministry, he was able to baptise over three thousand adults.

He leaves us a rich missionary legacy which flows from the Lord's own command to go and preach, to make disciples of all peoples, to heal and to bring peace to all.

Friend of the Sick

A characteristic feature of the last twenty or so years of his life was his regular visits to the sick in families or in hospitals. In his life he experienced in a very personal manner what sickness and suffering meant. As a young boy he battled with death. As a pre-novice he was even administered the last sacraments. As a young priest he was the victim of a series of ailments like cerebral malaria. In 1961 he underwent a kidney operation, later the varicose veins caused him immense discomfort, his heart was not in good condition and to cap it all towards the end of his life he was diagnosed as suffering from the gradual onset of Parkinson's disease. All these experiences far from making him bitter or discouraged, boosted his spirit with extra



enthusiasm to instil confidence and hope in those who were afflicted with various ailments. With his record of sickness, he was shaped to become an effective minister to the sick.

Jesus does not promise us that we shall be rid of our troubles and spared of all suffering; rather he offers the assurance, of which he himself is the realisation, that God is with us in every situation. He had a special way of empathising with the sick people and was much sought after to bless and pray over the sick. On any given day one could see him making the rounds of Shillong's numerous hospitals, parishes and religious communities bringing comfort and healing. He was truly the human face of Christ's compassion and love. How many thousands of sick and dying people he consoled would never be known to us but is stored in the heart of Him who is love.

Humility

When our heroes always seem to collapse and reveal feet of clay, the figure of Fr. Gui stands before us as a giant who combined great humility with immense personal charm. He was soft spoken and self effacing. He never sought power, position, place, honour, name or fame. His humble past walked with him as he mingled with people from all walks of life. He did not accomplish great things as we understand the term today or put up huge structures or leave behind a string of institutions. But whatever he did he did it with great love and commitment. This is perhaps the reason why people from every strata of society flocked to him. The quality of our life will be affected if we make our decisions based on that which we recognise as spiritually inferior - this may produce sporadic comfort, success and power but not lasting joy. We seek simple, honest, sensitive people for advice, guidance, and words of wisdom to cut through the pollution of our lives and the games we play with ourselves, others and God not because of the power of their words or advice but because of their modelling of what it is like to be whole, integrated and simple in their prayer and interaction with others - their total sensitivity to God, self and others.

Obedience

Learn to be like the river. Just flow. Ask for nothing. Expect nothing. Then you will find true peace. This seemed to be the secret of Fr. Gui's deep inner serenity and calm.



He was ready to go to any place even at a short notice in order to be of service to the Church and Congregation. Every where he found souls to be cared for and service to be rendered. It is difficult to keep track of all the places where he had worked during his life time. Considering his fragile health and constant battle with sicknesses of various intensity, it was not easy for him work in places which demanded of him great sacrifice and endurance. And yet never did he once complain about people, places or the burden of his work.

A Much loved Priest

As a priest Fr. Gui radiated unlimited goodness, kindness, gentleness, compassion and pastoral love. In him we could see 'the fruits of the Spirit' that St. Paul spoke about : "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...not provoking and envying others" (Gal.5:22,26). People loved him in all sincerity and reached out to him and called him "Pa ieid" (loving father). People took to him easily because he was open to all.

The love of Fr. Gui for the people of the Jaintia Hills and their love for him could be seen at the occasional visits his one time friends paid during the last years he spent at Sunnyside. He had time, place and the capacity to listen to everyone. Children loved to be near him, to caress his beard and to receive the reward of a sweet. His only desire in life was to be constantly with people. He spent time for them. He was never in a hurry. He walked slow both literally and figuratively. He would stop and chat with people who passed by, offering a piece of advice to one or a word of comfort to another. His destination was not a place but people. What is important in life is not how many miles we have walked but how many stops we have made to help those who fell by the wayside.

Fr. Gui was much sought after as a confessor in all religious and priestly communities and various parishes. It was not just his age which drew penitents to him but something in his person which made him a mediator of God's love and forgiveness. As a Salesian he loved his priesthood and religious life and took great care to promote vocations. Immediately on his arrival in India he wrote to his provincial suggesting names of young people he knew in Italy who could be enthused to opt for the missions. Later in his priestly ministry, he tried to



draw by example and by word, some young people who eventually joined the seminary or Savio Juniorate. While in Upper Shillong he provided that stable and solid missionary orientation to the new congregation founded by Mgr. Hubert D'Rosario - the Visitation Sisters of Don Bosco. One who influences people with virtues gets to the heart of the people.

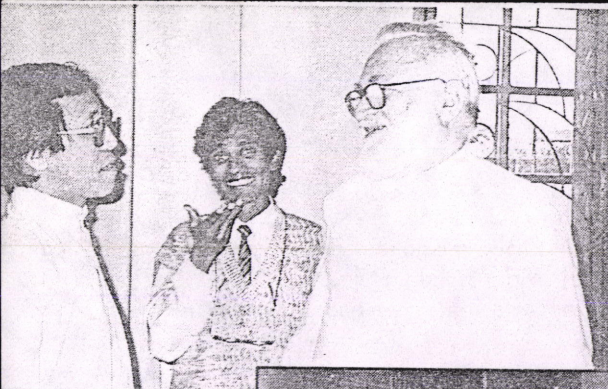
In his life as a priest and pastor of the people he showed that the things that really matter in life are not things at all. They are qualities that we need to cultivate in our lives assiduously, qualities of head and heart. Our real self-worth is in ourselves; not in the things we do or in the offices we hold; not even in the image people have of us. After all, a diamond remains a diamond whether studded into a crown or thrown into a dustbin. If it is thrown into a dustbin, the crown will be poorer and not the diamond. Fr. Gui was truly the gem of a priest.

Conclusion

Fr. Gui grew old gracefully and made old age appear less intimidating and more charming and inviting. I believe sweetness in life comes with old age just as at Cana the sweet wine was served at the end. The great Chinese philosopher and sage Lao Tze said that just as a live branch of a tree is soft and tender to the touch while a dried up branch is hard and brittle, so also with human life. Tenderness and compassion in relationships are signs of life while hardness, dryness and lack of love are signs of death. Fr. Gui led a vibrant life in that sense. What I, as well all his friends, will remember are his endearing qualities. Fr. Gui adhered to a personal belief in tolerance, had a genuine liking and love for God and for others, and gave to life to the fullest. He grasped well one of the deepest secrets in life: all that is really worth doing in life is what we do for others. Truly, a saint has moved away from our midst.

For Necrology:

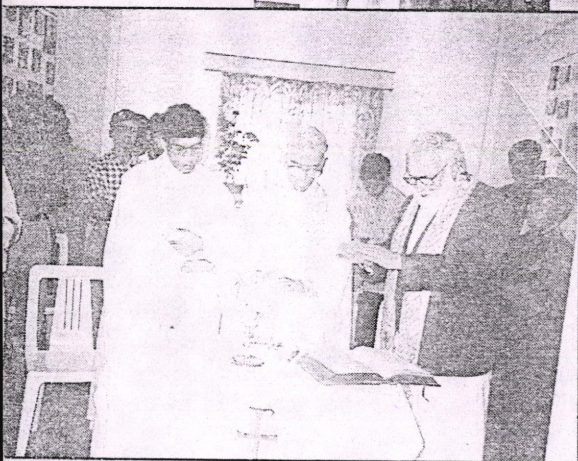
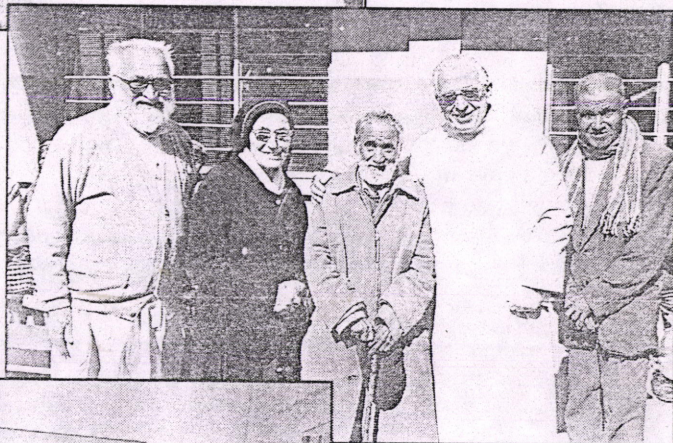
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| Born | : 24. 05. 1921 |
| Professed | : 16. 08. 1941 |
| Ordained | : 29. 06. 1950 |
| Died | : 28. 07. 1999 |



With Fr. J. Larrea
and friends



With Bro. Abraham
and Fr. Dominic Jalá
now Archbishop of
Shillong



With Mr. Joseph Gari,
his helper



At his last
concelebrated Mass
with Fr. John Kaabura
and Novices

