

## Fr. Dunston CMI: A Model for Formators



20 October 2020 was the fourteenth death anniversary of Fr. Dunston Olakkengal CMI; on 27 November 2020, we celebrate his birth centenary as well. Many in the CMI Congregation, especially those in the northern provinces in Kerala (Thrissur, Coimbatore and Sagar), knew him as an exemplary formator. On his death anniversary, some members shared, through voice mail, their memories of Father Dunston, how he influenced them during their formation.

Those who did their novitiate in Saravanampatti, Coimbatore, during 1984-1986 and 2004-2006 knew Fr. Dunston very closely. As he grew older, he became physically weak; hence, brothers took turn at night to watch over him and to extend support, if needed. One of them remembered how one day he did not find Father Dunston in his bed, and anxiously began to search for him; later, he found him in the chapel kneeling before the tabernacle. Though he lost his memory, he could identify the tabernacle and could sit quietly in the Lord's presence: "Though he forgot everything, he did not forget Jesus," recalled this former novice. He narrated another incident: the madam who was teaching English, seeing Fr. Dunston walking, said: "He is a saint!" The cover picture of the book mentioned below shows him in his old brown habit with an innocent smiling face, without any trace of hair on his head, as he lost his hair completely due to eczema which he had contracted in his forties.

When Fr. Dunston was at Ampazhakad, during 1953-1956, Fr. Malachias was the prior and his spiritual director. He asked him to write down his memories. Obediently, Fr. Dunston wrote down in a note book (163 pages in all) his memories. Based on this manuscript, Fr. Poly Payyappilly has written a biography of Fr. Dunston, with the title "Sutharyam Sundaram" (meaning, transparent and beautiful), the second edition of which will be published during the commemoration of his birth centenary.

Fr. Dunston was born on 27 November 1920 at Pavaratty, in the Archdiocese of Thrissur in Olakkengal family as the fourth of the seven children. “There was a spiritual atmosphere in the family,” writes Fr. Dunston. From his early years he wanted to be a saint. His elder sister Kunjethi influenced him in a very special way. She passed away one year after Fr. Dunston joined the CMI Congregation in 1935. Fr. Dunston wanted to be a saint, the first saint in India! For him that was an expression of his love for the country. When the cause of Sr. Alphonsa was started, he thought that it would take time. Before that, he decided resolutely that he should become a saint. His thinking was similar when the cause of Chavara was started: “It will take time; before that I will become a saint!”

In 1943, during his formation at Chethipuzha, he took part in a speech competition. He chose “Love of Truth” as the subject. He spoke affirmatively that Jesus had said, “I am the Truth.” Hence, he adopted the position that everyone should “love the truth, and live for it...” In fact, that remained his firm ideal throughout his life.

St. Thomas Moor was declared a saint in 1935. At that time, Fr. Dunston was fifteen. He thought to himself: “In Thomas Moor, I got a patron saint.” Thomas Moor was the chancellor of British Emperor Henri VIII. He became a martyr because he did not approve the latter's marriage with another woman when his first wife was still alive. “In Thomas Moor, I find very clearly most of my ideals. He is my saint. As years go by, my love for him increases,” Father Dunston wrote in his notes.

Fr. Dunston's love for truth was reflected throughout his life. The main areas of his religious life were discerning and promoting vocations, animating candidates under formation, and spending time at the confessional. He encouraged the candidates to be open. Fr. Benjamin, who was a formator for a long time in Chethipuzha and later in Dharmaram, once remarked: “The openness I found in those coming from the North (Kerala) was through the influence of Fr. Dunston.”

Fr. Dunston always and clearly opposed resorting to bribery to get things done. That was an expression of his love for truth. During the Provincial Synaxes, often when the house debated on issues, even with some tint of 'politics', members would approach Fr. Dunston to get his view. They knew that Fr. Dunston stood for truth. Interestingly, he

moved with all freely, irrespective of age differences. Indeed, Fr. Dunston was a blessing for the community in which he lived.

Fr. Dunston was the rector of Fr. Paul Kalluveetil during his initial formation at Varandarappilly for one year (1957). Recalling his acquaintance with Fr. Dunston, Fr. Kalluveetil wrote: “For the spirituality of Fr. Dunston there was no place for sentimentality. His relationship with God and men was founded on reason and conclusions drawn from it. When I consider his spirit of poverty, which was heroic and original, his simplicity and innocent smile, love for hard work, prayerfulness, and his ability to consider everything objectively and his courage to speak openly what he found correct. I find the spirituality of Jesus reflected.”

Fr. Dunston was the confessor of the late Mar Joseph Irimpen, Bishop of Palakkad, for a long time. Mar Jacob Manethodath, his successor, says that Bishop Irimpen was very sad when Fr. Dunston could not visit him because he was very weak. Mar Manethodath, while speaking during the funeral, said: “At a time when modern psychology proposes ways of overcoming areas of weakness and inferiority complex, Fr. Dunston showed how to accept weaknesses with courage and make them channels for receiving God's grace. When people with deficiencies try to withdraw into themselves, Fr. Dunston exhorted to make them ways of spiritual advancement and a guiding light and a sign of hope.”

Fr. Poly Payyappilly recalled on the eve of the anniversary of Fr. Dunston's death and wrote: “When I left home at the age of 14, I considered it as my final journey. Henceforth, I was totally submissive to the superiors.” This journey of eighty-six years ended on 20 October 2006 with the following words: “I am dying, I am going, I am happy, help me Jesus!” “The flower fell down, but the fragrance spreads...” We are reminded of the parable of yeast hidden in dough (Mt 13:33). Many who heard of the death of Fr. Dunston responded: “A saint has left us!” Fr. Dunston needs to be known to wider public. We all pray for his cause to be considered by the Church.