

TRUTH BLOSSOMS IN LOVE

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**English Translation of *Sutharyam Sundaram*
(Malayalam)**

Poly Payyappilly CMI

Translation

Francis Xavier Vellanikkaran CMI

2021

Dharmaram Publications

Bengaluru 560029 India

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English Translation of *Sutharyam Sundaram* (Malayalam)

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FOREWORD

A virtuous life anchored in Christ and lived in utmost simplicity and openness: that was Father Dunston Olakkengal CMI (1920-2006). He led a simple and frugal life; but he was most content and happy. He was unassuming in his relationships, but was always available whenever others needed his presence and service. His physical appearance was unattractive, but many - young and old - sought his company for spiritual guidance and moral support. He was the humblest among his confreres, but, at the same time, the most powerful: his inner strength was unparalleled and his words steeped in justice and mercy could not be outsmarted. In worldly terms, he was quite an insignificant person; but today he is remembered and celebrated by many and stands tall by his saintliness.

Having known Father Dunston, as my first contact in CMI Preshitha Province and my Novice Master, I had the sacred privilege of associating with him for a few years. It was a blessing that he mentored me as a young religious and guided me through rough waters. As I look back those years of associating with him, I am convinced that this was truly a blessed and providential chapter in my life. His instructions on the fundamentals of religious life, CMI charism, community life, and Eucharist-centred prayer life were received with attention and devotion, not for the grandeur or elegance of presentation but for the convictions emerging from lived experience and unchallengeable personal witness. Most of his candidates and spiritual sons and daughters vouch for Father Dunston's personal sanctity and credibility in religious commitment.

When we experience paucity of such simple but tall examples, retelling the life of Father Dunston becomes a necessity. It was such a noble task that was well-accomplished by Fr. Poly Payyappilly through *Sutharyam Sundaram*. As the first biography ever written on Father Dunston, it was indeed not an easy task; yet, being one of Father Dunston's beloved disciples, Fr. Poly took up this challenging task and completed the work with utmost care and truthfulness. Those who have known Father Dunston appreciate this biography for its true depiction of the person they have known and experienced. His simplicity and openness, commitment to justice and mercy, his love for poverty and resistance towards worldliness, etc., stand out in this work. In addition, the literary style is simple but elegant; it is an easily readable text and, in its pages, Father Dunston comes to the fore in most of the conversations.

As *Sutharyam Sundaram* is written in Malayalam, many felt that it would be in the interest of the younger generations as well as the non-Malayalam speaking audience that this biography is translated into English and other languages. As the life of Father Dunston is considered worth emulating, it should be rendered in different languages to be understood by many more. It was this task that was graciously accomplished by Fr. Francis Xavier Vellanikaran CMI with this English translation. Having known Father Dunston as a young boy, Fr. Francis Xavier grew up as a young religious in his company and association; it is his appreciation for this saintly soul that comes to the fore in this translation. He wrote on Father Dunston: "No one ever would question his saintliness nor his genuine interest in the people around him. The childlike innocence and the spirit of adventure that he

carried in his heart till the very last were the most endearing traits for me.”

Truth Blossoms in Love is an English translation of *Sutharyam Sundaram*, the first official biography on Fr. Dunston Olakkengal CMI. While the original is appreciated for its lucidity and simplicity in style and content, in this translation, Fr. Francis Xavier Vellanikkaran has successfully retained its style in maintaining the simplicity and straightforwardness of Fr. Dunston with elegance. The brevity and engaging narrative style will certainly make it an easy read. I am glad to state that the author, Fr. Poly, was actively involved throughout the translation process; the final product is a testimony of the excellent team work of Fr. Poly and Fr. Francis Xavier, a lesson that both of them learned from Father Dunston himself. Indeed, the fact that “the manuscript has passed the stringent test of the author’s eyes thrice ... vouches for the credibility of this translation.”

While congratulating Fr. Francis Xavier Vellanikkaran for *Truth Blossoms in Love*, I recall the dedication with which he completed this translation project. For him, it was not an academic exercise, but an act of dedication and religious commitment, and an expression of his filial love for Father Dunston, whom he remembers with reverence and admiration. It is my earnest hope that this work will be instrumental in making the life and holiness of Father Dunston known far and wide. Let it also promote and proclaim the saintly life of Father Dunston among many so that his heavenly intercession will be a solace and support to them. Moreover, let *Truth Blossoms in Love* inspire many to adopt a life of simplicity and saintliness.

As Fr. Dunston's life remains an inspiration to many in their spiritual sojourn, it is hoped that *Truth Blossoms in Love* makes his life more accessible to younger generations. His filial love for Jesus and uncompromising commitment to truth, his inimitable determination to be a saint, his unparalleled Christian simplicity and unqualified devotion to the Church, and his life-long dedication for the spiritual grooming of youngsters, indeed, make Fr. Dunston undoubtedly a model religious priest for the present generations.

Coimbatore
27 November 2021

Fr. Saju Chackalackal CMI
Provincial, Preshitha-Coimbatore

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

An absolute honour! This is how I would express my feeling when I think of being part of the translation process of the biography of the saintly Fr. Dunston! The awe with which I look at him now that I was blessed with an opportunity to closely nuance his memoirs can only be matched with the simplicity with which he dealt with us as novices. He was close to my family. His contributions to the development of the Eucharistic community where we belonged is an area for study in itself. He made me feel that I had a special place in his heart. I am sure that it would be the same with any individual who had interacted with him.

As the various instances mentioned here show, anecdotes of his memory loss are part of the 'folklore' in the Congregation and even among the people he served. He did not move around with speed; he never spoke with erudition; he was not very dashing to behold; he would sometimes doze off midway through a conversation... The list of his deficiencies would go on. Despite all these paucities, I would make a rather bold claim: No one ever would question his saintliness nor his genuine interest in the people around him. The childlike innocence and the spirit of adventure that he carried in his heart till the very last were the most endearing traits for me.

The biography has tried to present the hero in his own words as also the observations from his close associates and family. The thoroughness with which Fr. Poly Payyappilly, the author of the first biography, made his basic research must be seen to be believed. The amount of effort he has put into this 'homage to his guru' is quite unbelievable. That the

original had come out quite well is witness to his commitment to the work. Just like in any translation, we came across several pitfalls in our efforts. We have tried to stick to the spirit of the original as much as possible. The manuscript has passed the stringent test of the author's eyes thrice and that vouches for the credibility of this text.

Fr. Saju Chackalackal, Provincial, was instrumental in initiating and motivating us all through this project. As a veteran in writing, translating and editing volumes of books, he continues to be an inspiration in the realization of this humble effort. In every step of this effort I need to acknowledge his invaluable support and guidance. The role of Mrs. Devipriya is to be duly acknowledged for the time and effort she spent to make the necessary language modifications.

This translation is a sincere attempt to present the life of a saintly persona to a wider audience to motivate more people to strive to become saints, which, according to Fr. Dunston, should be the sole focus in life. Our sincere hope is that it acts as a seed to bring forth many more works on the life and the spirit of this saintly soul. In retrospection, I would joyously proclaim with the Psalmist: "This I know: God is on my side" (Psalms 56:10b). May God raise more and more saints from among us mortals and thus fulfil the purpose of creation, "for nothing will be impossible for God" (Luke 1:37).

Fr. Francis Xavier Vellanikaran CMI

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Sutharyam Suntharam (Transparent and Beautiful) is a biography of Fr. Dunston Olakkengal. His autobiographical notes are the main source of this book.

In the period 1953-56, when Fr. Dunston was a member of St. Teresa's Monastery, Ambazhakkad, Fr. Malachias Kannanaickal, the Prior, was also his Spiritual Director. Realizing the saintliness of his spiritual son, Fr. Malachias directed Fr. Dunston to pen down his memoirs. Abiding by the instruction of his spiritual director, Fr. Dunston noted down the parental influence on his life, experiences and incidents that formed his personality, the spiritual convictions that guided his life, the path he followed in his journey to holiness, and so on. He opened his sincere heart in a characteristically simple style, writing down whatever came into his mind, without any particular order.

The author has classified the scattered thoughts spread through 163 pages of a notebook without losing its spirit. The contents have been put together based on the subject. Related thoughts and incidents have been linked in an orderly stream of consciousness. Very few words were rearranged. The structure of some sentences has been changed. In a few instances, some sentences have been put together into paragraphs. The memories of Fr. Dunston shared by his family members and CMI confreres have been placed intermittently as and when found appropriate. Thus, *Sutharyam Suntharam* took shape.

Unlike other biographies, here, the hero speaks at length, like an autobiography. It is expected that the lucid style of self-manifestation that flows from the heart of the saintly soul

will be more appealing to the readers, especially those who have interacted with him.

I was entrusted with the divine endeavour of writing a biography of Fr. Dunston by Fr. Antony Puthenangady, former Provincial of Preshitha Province, Coimbatore. The publication of the book was completed by the Provincial Administration led by Fr. Winson Moyalan. The Preface for the second edition was written by Fr. Saju Chackalackal, the Provincial of Preshitha Province, Coimbatore. The beautiful cover page was designed by Mr. David, Smriti, Thrissur. The layout and printing were exquisitely done at Viani Printings, Kochi. My heartfelt thanks to all!

Sutharyam Suntharam is only a beginning. Many more who have lived with Fr. Dunston, who experienced and observed him from close quarters, who have been blessed by his words and presence and have taken them as a model, are yet to share their rich experiences. I sincerely wish and pray that this book will be a trigger for the same.

May God bless everyone abundantly through Fr. Dunston!

Fr. Poly Payyappilly CMI

Chapter 1

FATHER DUNSTON OLAKKENGAL CMI: A LIFE SKETCH

Fr. Dunston Olakkengal was born to the couple Paulose and Mariyam as the fourth among their six children. They belonged to the Olakkengal Aanatty family at Puthumanasserry in Pavaratty parish, which comes under the Archdiocese of Thrissur. According to the parish documents, he was born on 27 November 1920. However, his mother later clarified that it was a wrong entry and that he was born on 28 November 1920.

He was baptised by Fr. Alphonse Kollannur, the Prior of St. Thomas Ashram, Pavaratty on 6 December at St. Thomas Church, Palayoor, from where his mother hailed. As was customary, he was named Mathew after his maternal grandfather, but was lovingly called Ittooppunni at home.

“From as early as I can remember, we had a spiritual atmosphere in our family.” This is how Fr. Dunston recollects his family situation. Even before his birth, on 4 July 1919 to be precise, the Olakkengal family was consecrated to the Sacred Heart. Thus, the Sacred Heart was the centre of the daily life of the family. When he was three years old, the family experienced the tragic loss of the younger sister of Ittooppunni, who passed away in 1923 at the tender age of one and a half.

At the early age of four and half, Ittooppunni started his elementary education at St. Mary’s Elementary School, Puthumanasserry. It was owned by his family. He continued

his education at St. Joseph's High School, Pavaratty, run by the CMI fathers.

It was at the age of six and half that he made his first Confession. He participated in the preparatory retreat preached by Fr. Cornelius Chittilappilly CMI at Palayoor parish. He made his first confession to Fr. John Porathur, the parish priest at Pavaratty. He started going to confession every week. Receiving the Holy Communion along with Confession was not in vogue at that time. Accordingly, he was permitted to receive Communion after about a year, on 6 July, 1928. It was the first Friday of the month. Fr. Alphonse, who baptized him, presented Jesus to him for the first time on that day. Every year, on the first Friday of July, his family renewed its consecration to the Sacred Heart. Since 1942, Fr. Dunston used to remember the anniversary of his First Holy Communion on this day.

While still in High School, Ittooppunni, on 22 September 1935, entered the Aspirants' House at Pavaratty. His novitiate entrance was on 20 July 1938. His 'holy sister Kunjhethi' entered her heavenly abode on 26 July 1938. In the same year, on 23 November, he received the religious habit at the novitiate house in Ambazhakkad, where Fr. Ludvic Kuniyanthodath was his novice master.

After the year-long novitiate, he took the name Bro. Dunston of the Holy Family, and made his first profession on 24 November, 1939. He was sent to St. Joseph's Monastery, Koonammavu on 4 January 1941, to pursue his further studies and formation. After a year, he embarked on his philosophical studies at St. John of the Cross Monastery, Mutholy. His theological studies were at the Sacred Heart

Scholasticate situated adjacent to the Sacred Heart Monastery, Chethipuzha.

He made his perpetual profession on 24 November 1942. His beloved father was called for his eternal rest on 22 November, 1943. On 31 May 1947, Bishop Mar James Kalasserry raised Dn. Dunston to the Priestly Order at the monastery chapel at Chethipuzha. On 2 June Fr. Dunston, as a newly ordained priest, offered his first Holy Mass at the monastery chapel in Pavaratty.

Fr. Dunston embarked on his priestly ministry taking charge as the copastor of the parish attached to the Monastery at Chethipuzha the next day. He continued as copastor at the parishes attached to St. James Monastery, Manimala from 1 January 1948 and at Lourde Carmel Ashram, Ayiroor from 1 October 1948. His beloved mother left for her heavenly abode on 9 June 1950.

The CMI Congregation was divided into three provinces in 1953 and Fr. Dunston was part of Devamatha Province, Thrissur. On 22 June 1978, Fr. Dunston gave his consent to be part of the Preshitha Vice Province, Coimbatore, which was formed later on 11 March 1979. These two provinces were his main areas of ministry. He was first appointed as Procurator of St. Theresa's Monastery, Ambazhakkad and Confessor for the Novitiate house there. He thus started his long sojourn in the field of formation in the Congregation in various titles like formator, assistant to formators, and spiritual director of formees. He served as Rector of Aspirants at St. Pius X Aspirants House, Varandarappilly (1956-65, 1967-69), St. Berchmans Aspirants House, Elthuruthu (1965-67), Jothi Nivas, Ranchi (1977-78), St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara (1986-87), CMI Bhavan, Palakkad (1988), and Little Flower

Minor Seminary, Kaundampalayam (1994-96). In the period 1982-84, he was appointed as the Novice Master at Preshitha College, Saravanampatti. He played a pivotal role in the formation of numerous candidates in both Devamatha and Preshitha provinces.

In the period 1991-93, when the CMI Brothers' unit was formed, based in St. Paul's House, Kadalundi, Fr. Dunston was appointed as their Spiritual Director.

Fr. Dunston has served as the Superior of various Ashrams in two provinces: Immaculate Heart Monastery, Varandarappilly (1969-72, 1978-79) and St. Joseph's Home, Attappady (1973-77) were the places where he served in the administrative ministry. He also served as member in Little Flower Mission Centre, Coimbatore and Bharathamatha Ashram, Palakkad.

Fr. Dunston believed in the power of Confession, as a result of which he spent many hours in the Confessional, where he led the penitents to the Lord through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He helped many as their Confessor and Spiritual Director. One of the notable personalities of whom he was the Spiritual Director was Mar Joseph Irimpen, the first Bishop of Palakkad.

His siblings left this world for eternal rest as follows: Mr. Joseph on 12 August 1982, Sr. Mary Marcene on 26 September 2004, and Ms. Kochuthresia on 27 November 2009.

The Olakkengal family had a natural aptitude to respond positively to God's call to consecrated life. Parents intensely prayed that their children may be granted a vocation to religious life. The Olakkengal family is the one that gave birth to this holy soul and offered him to serve the church through

the CMI Congregation. His elder brother, Joseph, attempted to enter religious life through the CMI Congregation, but found it difficult to fit in. He then decided that it was not his calling, and, obeying the guidance offered by the authorities in the congregation, he returned home to live the life of a householder, and continue the family line to the next generation. God blessed him with ten children in his blissful wedlock, of whom, three were blessed with priestly and religious vocation: Fr. John Maria Vianny serves in Palakkad diocese, Bro. Savio in MMB Congregation while Sr. Licy in FCC Congregation. The younger sister of Fr. Dunston served in the SH Congregation assuming the name Sr. Mary Marcene. Fr. Dunston, who is a member of the Thrissur Archdiocese and Bro. Linston, a member of CMI Devamatha Province, Thrissur, are from the Olakkengal family.

Fr. Dunston lived 86 long years on this earth. The strong desire to become a saint was the pivot around which the daily routine for his whole life revolved. The grace of God and the light of faith that he was blessed with from childhood helped Ittooppunni to glide through the arduous journey to holiness. God opened up streams of divine convictions and insights for him. His virtuous parents and his 'saintly sister Kunjhethi' turned out to be the channels of divine grace for Ittooppunni. He discerned with their help that religious life was his way to holiness. He overcame his limitations with the help of strong principles. He was obedient to the core, with a childlike simplicity. He distanced himself from relationships and, instead, turned them into means for inward growth in holiness. He fashioned for himself an identity as the epitome of the spirit of poverty. He recognized honesty as the synonym for holiness. Praying ceaselessly, he was transformed into prayer himself. Fr. Dunston made his life a

grand experience by living in the light of faith, practising love for the neighbour, loving the soil, and becoming one with nature. He had a constant urge to go around the world to preach the Gospel. Yet, he gained strength from this unfulfilled desire to encourage vocations and helped several candidates discern their call, thus imprinting his signature in the field of formation. He continued to spread the aroma of holiness around him heroically, by practicing virtue. The once-stubborn and short tempered Ittooppunni, by way of his will power and constant seeking, was transformed into the saintly Fr. Dunston.

A person known for his forgetfulness, he was, nevertheless, a *yogi*, who never let Jesus away from his constant remembrance! He started the pilgrimage towards sainthood from childhood and persevered till he breathed his last. The great soul entered into eternity reciting the Holy Name of Jesus on 20 October 2006. He stands tall, bestowing on us the message of the significance of spotless virtue. The fragrance of his virtue will continue to spread beyond time!

Chapter 2

ON THE SACRED PORTALS OF HOLY ASPIRATIONS

Ittooppunni evinced interest in spiritual matters since childhood. The spiritual atmosphere that pervaded his home acted as a contributing factor to his strong convictions in virtues and growth in spirituality. There was a spiritual touch to his daily routine, as well as in all the endeavours he involved himself in childhood. While he was with his siblings and friends, he would offer *Qurbana*, build churches on the sand, and organize festal processions.

He started going to church on his own since he was five. The church was around three quarters of a mile from his house. The fearsome stories about the thick and dark forest on both sides of the road could not desist him from going to the church. Young Ittooppunni, thus went to the church daily 'to become a good boy.'

Training Ground for Saints and Spiritual Reading

His home also provided a favourable ambience for reading. He read the New Testament and biography of saints, especially those of St. Teresa of Avila and St. Therese of Child Jesus. Fr. Dunston explains how the reading sessions followed by their explication by his elder sister Kunjhethi at home, helped him:

“When I was around seven, I remember sitting with the members of the family and listening to the reading of good books. *The Story of a Soul* is a book I remember. My elder sister was the one who usually read and explained the books to us.

I fondly recall how my mother used to enjoy listening to the reading sessions. Our family has immensely benefitted from those reading sessions. The desire to enter consecrated life also took root and flourished in me as a result of these sessions.

“If father was present during the sessions, he would pose questions to know whether we had listened attentively, and whether we had understood what was being read. Sometimes, he would even provide further explanations or exhort us to concentrate. I was only too happy to give ears to his wise words.

“Opportunities to listen to stories about St. Therese of Child Jesus were galore, right from the time I was about five. There were several solemnities at the Monastery chapel in her honour. Around the time I made my first Confession, my mother bought me a small book named *Imitation of the Little Flower*. I completed the book in no time. I read it repeatedly. I had often heard discussions on this saint at home. These instances gradually and significantly augmented my desire to become a saint.”

Fr. Dunston had once confided that he was curiously drawn to portrayal of the virtuous life of the Little Flower, which, he felt, was very charming, and one that he felt “he could try his hand at” to become a saint, as he was inspired by her path to sainthood. He pursued the spirituality of the saint until the end of his days.

He introduced the ‘shortcut’ method of the Little Flower to the aspirants he was asked to guide. “One does not need to perform great deeds to be a religious. One only has to accomplish every action with the faith that Jesus desires us to do small things with a generous heart and total

commitment.” He taught this principle to his disciples through the example of his life.

In the School of Kunjhethi

Kunjhethi was not only a senior family member for Ittooppunni, she was also a guru who constantly motivated him in his spiritual growth. It was under her tutelage that Ittooppunni imbibed the rudimentary lessons in spirituality. This is how Fr. Dunston writes about it:

“My sister used to talk about the lives of saints, conveying their relevance to various situations in life. Anecdotes from the lives of saints were a part and parcel of our daily conversations. I felt a sense of awe whenever I was in her presence. She was very articulate, and could spontaneously transform a regular conversation on mundane matters into a spiritual one and have us completely engrossed in it. In this way, she inspired her listeners towards a virtuous life. Except for one Advent season when she advised me not to receive Holy Communion everyday, I do not remember her ever advising me. I recall a letter she had written to me when she was in the boarding school at a convent in Kandassankadavu. She reminded me in it about the pious practice of reciting the prayer ‘Hail Mary’ forty times and offering it to Baby Jesus during the Advent season.

“Until I was 14, we shared a special bond, one that was stronger than what I shared with the other members of my family. We had several occasions to be separated in God’s Providence. During those days, I used to involve myself in devotional practices that I had imbibed from my sister and her conversations. When we conversed, I used to be inspired

and, as a result, often took great resolutions. Such was the motivational power of those conversations.

“I started emulating her since I was five years old. Following her example, I stopped consuming salt, as a mark of abstinence, though I had enjoyed it until then. I imitated her in giving up many other things as well.

“She was the inspiration for us to be regular to the church. The path to the church was very challenging in those days. During the rainy season, the streams gushed with water often upto our knees. My sister, who suffered from certain problems in her foot, was, however, the first to go to church braving all climatic challenges. Then how could we remain at home? Yet there were occasions when we lazed around, citing the challenges on the way as excuses not to go to church, while she would go to church without fail. Usually, I started to the church some time after she had gone. I used to feel sorry for her when I saw her tired and resting on the way. But, to see her standing on the way with a smile, was a sight to watch. I was blessed to see that many a time. The smile may not have been the result of having seen her little brother, but, as a result of a deeper, spiritual reason. This I was sure of, as I had great esteem for her spirituality”.

On 26 July 1938, “the saintly Kunjhethi” of Ittooppunni was taken up for eternal rest. He believed that his sister was a saint. He had heard that the earthly body of saints would remain intact. And so, he expected that the body of his sister too would remain intact.

Even while his memory started failing him, the recollections about his dear sister remained fresh in his mind. “I want to see my sister. She was good. She corrected me when I erred. She used to narrate plenty of stories. I am not

able to see my sister.” Fr. Dunston went back in years and became Ittooppunni when he reminisced about his sister. He cried, laughed and smiled at the thought of her.

Patriotismthe Harbinger of All Virtues

From childhood, Ittooppunni treasured the desire to go to heaven. “When I go to heaven, I shall experience all blessings. What else do I need? I will be much satisfied then.” This was the mind of Ittooppunni. He is very sure of that. He would often say, “No one, not even my sister, had advised me to become a saint.” However, it is true that the spiritual ambience at home, as well as the guidance of Kunjhethi had channelized the desires of his heart towards holiness. Every aspect of his personality came together at the one-pointed focus to become a saint. Yet, this desire to become a saint was, initially, not totally without egoism, in Ittooppunni. It was, however, refined over the years spent in inner struggle and gradually became crystallized with experience. The following is how Fr. Dunston introspects on this journey:

“To become a saint, one has to avoid sin and act virtuously; I knew nothing other than the fact that I had to perform a lot of virtuous acts. I had not concentrated on the love of God. It was the fear of God that led me. The twin factors that pushed me to holiness were the wish to be a good person and witness by others.

“I thought my wish to be a saint would be interpreted as pride. I did not know that it was something permissible. It was as though I was trying to gain something that was not allowed.

“One day I was talking to my sister as she was drawing water from the well. During the conversation I asked her ‘Is it okay to want to be a saint?’ She cited the example of the Little Flower and showed me that it was perfectly alright to wish to be a saint. Since then, confidently, and with no qualms of guilt, I started to wish and pray for the same. With that, the desire to become a saint, turned into one of relating to God.

“My sister used to speak a lot about saints. One day, just as I was preparing for my first Confession (at the age of six-and-a-half), she said: ‘There has been no saint from our country till date.’ I heard this statement with much sorrow. I was very sad that my country was denied a blessing that other nations had a plenty. Also, I was not yet shorn of the thought that desire to be a saint was pride. Yet, patriotism pushed me from within, to want to become a saint. Since that day, my desire was to become a saint in order to gift India with this blessing. However, I did not dare speak about it to anyone.

“My aspiration to become a saint was stained with the desire for worldly fame and adulation. When I would kneel before the side altars in the monastery chapel, my mind would create thoughts of me (my statue) adorning one such altar when I became a saint. I would also think how Pavaratty would rise in stature because of my sainthood. I would be the first saint in India. My body would be buried in Pavaratty.

“It was in 1937 that I first heard about the saintly founder, Fr. Chavara, and the prayer for his canonization. At first, I was happy when I heard that his canonization process was in track; I prayed with passion for the same. However, my desire to be the first Indian saint wrought in me, an

undesirable wish that his canonization process would not be successful. Such disturbing thoughts gradually gained momentum in my mind. In 1938, my prayers did not include the canonisation of Fr Chavara. Ashamed of myself, my arrogance and my immaturity, and also in order to win over such debasing thoughts, I opened myself to my spiritual father. Thus, I succeeded in nipping such thoughts in the bud, and, instead, commenced praying with renewed vigour for his canonization.

“After 4-5 years, the popular interest in the canonization process of Fr. Chavara tapered off. It seemed that people had abandoned the cause. My old desires welled up again. I despaired that I had not become a saint yet. I tried to discern God’s Will. I felt that India was denied a saint because of me.

“In the year 1945, I heard about Sr. Alphonsa. I read her biography. I saw that people were getting interested, expecting a saint for India. I joined in this exultation. Yet I imagined: ‘All this hullabaloo will die down with time. May be God will wait for me to become a saint before raising her to sainthood.’ Owing to this vain thought I had a feeling within that I may die soon.

“I ardently wish that India gets a modern-day saint of her own. I believed this would trigger the conversion of this great nation. The third in the list of intentions for my priestly ordination in 1947, was: ‘For the holy people in India to be raised to sainthood.’ Now, in 1953, the cause of Sr. Alphonsa is progressing strongly. Still, my old thought lingers on. I don’t think her cause will be fulfilled until I reach heaven. I don’t think there would be anyone else who had spent so many years for the cause of a saint for India. I want to be the

foremost among those who attempted for the uplift of my country. And I believe it is the Will of God for me.

“Even before I heard of Mahatma Gandhi, I burnt with love for my motherland. My blood would boil and tears well up and flow from my eyes when I learnt history. When I was about 10, I was attracted to the struggle of freedom led by Gandhi and the Congress. When they succeeded, I experienced success. Hearing of Gandhi’s assassination, I shed tears four times in the week. I wanted to contribute spiritually, perhaps more than what Gandhi and his friends, according to me, had contributed physically, for this country. I told myself that I would not be satisfied until I showed the world that I loved my country in God more than they did. The world should realize the grandeur of what faith can accomplish. Let the world know that Catholic faith can inspire such patriotism that a child, from the age of seven, has been making sacrifices for the nation and even ardently wishing to lay down his life for the cause of the nation. May the glory of God be firmly revealed to the people of India. O God, it is not for the fulfilment of my reveries (those were mere childish desires of my childhood), but for my desire to embrace all nations as one, in You, so that Your Will be done.

“As in Your Providence I am born in this nation, I should love India in a special way. My love for my nation has facilitated my love for You. However, today I love India because of You and in You. Let Your Will be realized in me soon. Let Your blessings not go wasted in me. Bring to completion what You have started in me. I do not know what to do. I am just waiting, expecting You to make the move. I surrender to You O Almighty God. You have preserved hope in me till now; let me grow on this hope till my last breath. I have nothing else but the hope in You. I have everything in

that hope. I would enter eternity with fulfilment if I die with that hope. Your entirety will be mine. I shall show You to the teeming millions of my compatriots. Anyone who trust in you would never be put to shame; hence these thoughts are not childish blabbering.

“The stimulus for the desire to become a saint was patriotism, as it was laced with shades of pride in being an Indian. Nevertheless, it brought me closer to God. As I advance in age, I am sanctifying it. I take it very seriously. In the beginning, it was not easy to want to be a saint motivated strictly by love for God alone. It took me several years to come to this realization. But for the love for my country, my life would have taken an entirely different path. I could not see any reason for becoming a saint for my own sake. This love for the nation has given an elevated perspective to my life and removed from my mind the depressing thought as to ‘why was I born?’ and spurred me on with a reason to live. It renews me. In short, love for my nation is the harbinger of all my blessings.”

Chapter 3

LIFE OF CONSECRATION: PATH TO SAINTHOOD

The spiritual vibes in the family filled Ittooppunni with strong divine convictions. The rather strict discipline insisted upon by his parents was instrumental in forming the various aspects of his personality, conducive for growth in holiness. The regular spiritual reading at home aided progression in virtues and nourishment of the vocation. The delightful conversations with his elder sister, Kunjhethi, and her exemplary life, shed light in his path towards the divine portals of holiness. Consequently, Ittooppunni was able to discern that the course for his voyage to perfection lay in consecrated life. This understanding gathered momentum, aided by the family surroundings, his acquaintance with different people, the day-to-day events, and his experiences. It grew within, from strength to strength, filling him with strong convictions and a deep consciousness, moulding his entire personality. Fr. Dunston looks back at the way in which Ittooppunni came upon his vocation.

To Emulate the Sister

Let us begin with an instance in Ittooppunni's life when he was about five years old:

"I happened to observe the conversation and later, resolutions that took place between my sister, Kunjhethi, and my cousin (aunt's daughter) Mariyakutty (almost the same age as my sister) at the house of my uncle, Maani. Though I do not remember the exact conversation, it revolved around the decision about taking up religious life. I understood that

both of them were to enter the convent soon. Since two of my aunts used to visit the convent regularly, and another aunt was already a religious nun, I could understand the terms 'convent' and 'religious nun'. Of course, at that age I did not know anything about religious life. Yet, I was intrigued by the nature of their conversation, and by their sense of excitement. I yearned to be part of such a life. Though hazy, that was the first divine call in my memory. I just wanted to live like the two sisters.

"Without much delay, both of them went on to the convent at Kandassankadavu for their studies. When my sister returned from the convent, she used to talk a lot about spiritual matters, and on religious life. I started emulating her from then on."

Consecrated Life Is the Path for Him

At the age of seven, inspired by his sister Kunjhethi, Ittooppunni decided he wanted to be a saint. It was this desire that led him to choose religious life. Let us hear of the circumstances in the words of Fr. Dunston:

"My desire to become a saint was progressing. From the words of my elder sister, I gradually began to recognise one thing: Most of the saints that she had so appealingly spoken about, were either religious priests or sisters, and that only one among the diocesan priests had become a saint. From these conversations, the one thing I surmised and hence, resolved in my little mind, was: 'I want to be a religious.' The desire to be a priest – a religious priest – was born at an early age of seven, only preceded by the desire to be a saint.

"I had absorbed from my sister, the manner in which I should respond to those who questioned me on the reason for

my desire to be a religious. The idea of becoming a religious, in order to be elevated to the stature of a saint, to save the souls of people, became quite appealing to me.”

Influence of Parents

Good vocations are formed in families with a spiritual vibe. Parents who create a healthy environment at home, prepare in the minds of their children, the ground suited to respond according to the musings of the Spirit. It is their natural and positive attitudes, as well as daily routines, that sets the background for an apt milieu for the dreams of God to thrive in their children. Fr. Dunston explains how the words and deeds of his parents prepared him to heed to the divine call:

“My parents used to speak of priests and nuns with much respect and love. True, we had experienced the pangs of dire poverty at times. Yet, as I see it, this did not deter my parents from enthusiastically helping priests and regularly inviting them home for dinner. On occasions, I used to feel that my parents were going overboard in entertaining the priests. I used to argue with them by averring that priests do not visit homes to eat and drink. So, we need to show our love and respect to them only according to what we have. Though this was my refrain, it fell on deaf ears.

“I have heard from a few sources, that my mother used to motivate her sisters to join the convent. My father used to say in a lighter vein that if my mother had known convents in her childhood, she would have become a religious sister. The love and respect that my parents exhibited towards religious life, was an incentive for us to develop an ardent desire for such a life. Except my sister Kochuthresia, all of us had expressed a wish to join religious life, even as children. As we grew in age, we performed several acts of sacrifice and tried

our level best to achieve the same. Even Kochuthresia has been trying to get in this line for some years now.”

Their mother may have wanted to realize through her children, her own unrealized desire. The influence of their grace-filled parents inspired the children in choosing their vocation. The words and acts of his parents acted as strengthening reminders of his vocation for Ittooppunni.

Fr. Dunston remembers two instances:

“Once it was decided to get the goldsmith to design a chain for me to wear either on my hand or neck in a way that it could not be removed. As this would show me apart from the common people, I was strongly against wearing ornaments. My mother gave me a promise in order to overcome my resistance. She said that this could be seen as a source of money referring to my entrance into religious life. I conceded to her argument since I had a fervid desire to enter religious life and I could not perceive any other sources of income. Also, I trusted the words of my mother.”

Here is yet another instance: “When Ittooppunni woke up in the middle of a night, he overheard his parents conversing. ‘If they so desire, let all five of them go (into religious life).’ I have not heard anything more joyous from my parents. For many days, my prayer after Communion was that all five of us enter religious life. I was very happy, since I understood that there were no reservations from our parents and that they supported the idea.”

Once the Olakkengal family went on a pilgrimage to Malayattoor. They were in a boat, rowing across the river Periyar. On the way, the pilgrims spent some time on the banks at Alwaye. After their rest, they resumed their journey.

Only after having moved a considerable distance did they notice that little Ittooppunni was not with them. Anxiously they rowed their way back. They found Ittooppunni in the place where they had rested earlier. "What would you have done if we had not returned?" asked his brother Joseph. Without much of a thought, Ittooppunni responded: "I would have gone to a nearby monastery and joined them."

At 14, during his thanksgiving prayer after Holy Mass, as mentioned earlier, the subject of his prayer was his vocation. "Make me a saint. Bless my mother to see me a religious priest. Make all five of us religious. Attract my bestie (N.P. Devassy) and friend (E.K. Paul) to religious life. (Since 1935, I prayed for another friend, M.J. Varghese, too.)"

When Individuals Became Inspiration

God, in His Providence, sowed the seed of vocation deep within Ittooppunni. His family and home environment helped him discern and nourish this divine call. Fr. Dunston recalls that the persons he came across in his daily life, such as, at church, school and other such places, were God's instruments to remind him of, and deepen this vocation:

"A month before I turned nine, I happened to make my confession to an elderly priest who had come to attend the 40-hour adoration at the monastery. Later, I came to know that it was Fr. Pathrose. He asked me, 'Do you wish to join the monastery?' Since I had taken a resolve on this matter more than a year ago, I replied in the affirmative, immediately. He reported it to my father. My secret thus became a matter of discussion in the family. When they enquired, I conceded that I had positively responded to the priest. I remember my teacher Mr. Madhava Menon had spoken of my vocation in the class more than once, having guessed it from my nature.

In fact, in order to teach us the meaning of the word 'recognize', he started by asking us to visualize the scenario in which I would become a priest a few years from then.

"In spite of all these and many other queries, my desire, thankfully, remained a secret. Many would enquire of me on this decision. Yet, I wouldn't give them a clear answer. My response, almost always, used to be this: 'As there is time, I have not yet decided.' I thought it wouldn't be a good idea to divulge the secret. I was reluctant to open up even to priests. I intended to open up only to those who would be capable of making it a reality, at the right time and only when I was certain it would be realized. I believed that anything other than this, would turn into a hindrance in realizing God's call. People ask out of curiosity. No good can come out of it. I realised that even some priests belonged to this category. God's plan, until it is fulfilled, should not be subjected to unnecessary criticism or insult. I hold on to this opinion till date.

"I revealed this even to Devassy, my bestie, only after five long years. And, even then, only because I was aware people have already come to know about it.

"Other friends and our domestic help had helped me in reminding me of my vocation. Even if they did not know of my decision to enter religious life, they guessed it and used to speak of related matters.

"I had written a letter in English to my aunt Sr. Mary Rose to inform her that, like her, I would like to enter religious life in the Carmelite order. However, I did not post it.

“The thought of entering religious life never left my mind. It controlled every one of my actions. As days went by, this desire gathered momentum.”

Overcoming Limitations...

Even when the call for religious life was growing day by day and was taking root in him, awareness of his limitations was bothering Ittooppunni. He had to engage in an exceptional battle with himself to overcome them. Here is how he recounts the hopes about his vocation, the limitations which stood as barriers, his strong conviction to overwhelm them and the struggles he engaged in this regard:

“My sister had spoken on different occasions on the qualities to be seen in one who is preparing to enter religious life. I couldn’t see those traits in me albeit the awareness that I had some good qualities in me. However, on the whole, I had several limitations. I think I was not seen as somebody with determination. I was rather indolent in prayer. Though I had good aspirations, they were not seen in my deeds. Learning of it from my mother, and also that I was getting worse with age, I felt bad.

“Whatever happens, I was very clear in mind that there was no turning back from the decision to become a religious. As I expected several hurdles in the way for my siblings and myself to enter religious life, I decided I shall only follow after them. I felt they did not have the wherewithal to surmount the opposing circumstances as I was endowed with. I was determined when I came of age, I would join religious life no matter what hurdles or struggles deter me. At the same time, I was prepared to take advantage of the first opportunity that came my way to join consecrated life.

“Fr. Abdias, my aunt’s son, joined the Aspirants’ house when I was in the third form. A few days before he was to join, Fr. Athanasius wanted to meet him. So, I accompanied him to the monastery. To the question, ‘Do you wish to join the monastery?’ Fr. Abdias began to present his doubts regarding financial difficulties and permission from his brother and so on. Then Fr. Athanasius said, ‘Don’t look into such matters. I just want to know whether you wish to join or not.’ His words rang a bell in my mind. Whenever the various obstacles in the way of realizing my vocation came to my mind, I was consoled by the words of Fr. Athanasius and decided that all those were not my concern; all that was necessary was for me to surrender myself totally.

“I did not find any positive signs for me to enter the seminary and remain there. If I had feared failure, I might have remained at home. I was in need of a daring attitude and I expected it all from the Lord. I ventured into religious life with a mind determined to face any type of failure. My laziness and lack of punctuality were major obstacles. Though I could not overcome them in my worldly life, I hoped I could prevail over these adamantly evil habits in religious life. I had two types of foundational traits in me. On the intellectual side, I had sufficient intellectual acumen and could think rationally, while on the side of spiritual life, I had an ardent desire to be a saint and an aptitude for piety.”

While lamenting on his limitations, Ittooppunni recognized the positive traits within and had the purposefulness and determination to build his life upon them. He was motivated to overcome all obstacles because of his faith in divine providence, trust in God, his own aptitude to consistently prevail over self, obedience, intellectual acumen, discernment and, above all, his passionate desire to

lead a holy life. Ittooppunni had to summon extraordinary courage to surmount his shyness, the chief obstacle for growing in his call to religious life. The longing to become a saint provided the necessary impetus in this daring venture. This adventurousness was part of his nature as far as leading a holy life was concerned. Fr. Dunston says:

“Singing in the presence of somebody or appearing before a community was a big embarrassment, rather an impossibility for me. I couldn’t see a way out of this weakness at that time. Naturally, this was an issue that induced fear in me. I expected God to help me overcome this inhibition. I could only wish that I would have everything that I needed, when it was time.

“I started learning to assist at Holy Mass even before I received my First Holy Communion as my mother desired. I used to spend a few days during my annual vacation, to learn a part, after which I would go to my uncle’s place. Thus did my annual preparation progress. I used to think that unless I shed my shyness, I would merely learn to assist. Since I was memorizing without understanding the meaning of the Syriac words, learning became increasingly hard. But for one day when there were only four or five persons in the church, I had not assisted at Mass before entering the Aspirants’ House. I did not complete my preparation until I became an aspirant.

“On the previous day of my seminary entrance I left the church very late. I saw that there were only a few people – an elderly gentleman, and a few ladies remaining – seeking to receive Holy Communion. Fr. Timotheus started distributing Communion. However, there was no one to light the candles and to hold the Communion plate. On seeing me, he called

me and I went. But I refused to do the job. I don't know what came over myself. He tried his best to cajole me. He indicated that I was to do such things from the next day. I knew that the monastery is not meant for those who do not obey. I did not care what the priest thought about me. I was adamant that I would not do it. I was not desperate that I could not conquer my weakness. If I had to do it from the following day, I firmly believed that God would grant me the necessary strength. I needed much grit for the same. Though my anxiety and shivering continued in this regard, God did bestow upon me the grace to obey.

“Even after a year since my seminary entrance, when I was assisting at Holy Mass on the grand altar, I used to bring the wine and water, all the while, shivering with fear. This was the case even on ferial days. I had gone to the altar with the thurifer when I had to go with water for the priest to wash his hands. For me, it was not the usual absent-mindedness. It was a memory fade due to fear. If I ventured to enter religious life despite such issues and the consequent fear of being sent away, it was only due to the sole intention of becoming a saint. Else, the coward that I am, I would not have dared to enter into this experiment. As far as I was concerned, this was a daring adventure. It was this preparedness that aided me in handling the various challenges that came in my way to priesthood.”

Following the Footsteps of St. Matthew...

Matthew was a tax collector. For the Jews, it was anathema to be collecting tax for the Romans. On seeing him at the customs post, Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” Matthew left everything and followed him. (*Cfr.* Matthew 9:9; Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27-28). He heard the call of Jesus and responded

immediately. Neither his job nor the money stood in the way. He gave no excuses. On the contrary, he showed his availability through obedience. Ittooppunni was fascinated by the instant response of Matthew. Let us listen to the words of Fr. Dunston:

“Once, I heard my elder sister sing paeans of the way Matthew the Apostle responded to his vocation. As he was my patron saint, I had a special devotion to this saint. Just as Matthew responded instantly to Jesus’ call, I used to ask myself whether I was prepared to leave everything immediately, and go at short notice, if I happened to be in the monastery campus or elsewhere, and Fathers told me, ‘We shall receive you this instant into the monastery’. And, I felt that my heart was always prepared to respond immediately.

“As, by the tender age of seven, I had detached my heart from the love of my family, of matters and all things worldly, it came quite easy to me. People used to come to my father with their problems in search of an amicable solution. Keenly observing these discussions, I started to develop an interest in such matters of litigation. Soon, I would ask myself, ‘Of what use are these to me?’ and started distracting myself from them.”

Ittooppunni firmly resolved that he would respond to God’s call just as Matthew did. He protected himself from anything that came in the way of this resolution. Matthew responded as soon as Jesus called him. Never did he turn back. “I too will follow immediately when I am called, and I would not turn back.” Ittooppunni was fervent in this decision. The day after the feast of St. Matthew, on 22 September, Ittooppunni left his house.

Chapter 4

LEARNING FORGIVENESS ON THE PATH OF SUFFERING

Learning to walk the path of forgiveness and reconciliation did not come easy to Ittooppunni, who was stubborn by nature. The effort he took to overcome this drawback was a very painful journey of self-discovery. Ultimately, it was his home and school, which acted as the crucible that helped forge forgiveness in this obstinate child. The resolve to become a saint gave him the necessary determination. As witnessed by Ittooppunni himself, the light of faith and the grace of God, readily available since the age of five, were the pillars of his strength. God led him through a gradual growth in the virtue of forgiveness. Fr. Dunston gives an account of his growth in maturity with regard to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Learnt from His Father

“My father was prepared to offer all possible assistance to anyone in need. People used to come to him for resolving conflicts, or to get his advice on legal matters or for help regarding their health. He used to welcome everyone. If they were undergoing treatment in two different systems of medicine, he used to admonish them. It was love and concern for them that made him castigate them when he felt they were doing something that would not be beneficial to them. My father used to say that his anger and irritation, would not last more than five minutes.

“My father’s behaviour with his detractors was quite surprising to his family members. An incident that happened in 1933 or a little earlier, illustrates this: It was a time when we used to get around Rs 17 when we sold one thousand coconuts. He was in deep debt, and one that could not be repaid even if all our properties were to be sold. Many of our creditors had gone to court. In some cases, the verdict was declared. Father had decided to mortgage a major part of the property to a man named Ponnor Chacku, who lived in Thaikkaattil, and to repay the debts from the amount earned. Mr. Chacku gave his assent to this arrangement, albeit with some reluctance. However, the transaction did not take place as planned. An impatient creditor, a member of the Pavaratty parish, met Mr. Chacku with my father to discuss the issue. Mr. Chacku promised him to make good the debts soon. But, in order to trap my father, this parishioner secretly remitted the amount in the court.

One night, he joined the sepoy sent by the court for subsequent action, and stayed in a house in our neighbourhood. Their plan was to surround our house before sunrise the next day. It was not a practice in those days for the creditor to join the sepoy when they came to recover the debt. The routine was for the sepoy to take a bribe, and return, stating, ‘Man missing’. But, the man was determined to avoid such a possibility and to have my father arrested; it was with this intention that he came down to stay there that night. However, the lady of the house they stayed in, informed us of their wicked plan in the nick of time. Immediately, my father escaped through the backdoor. Just before sunrise, the man and the sepoy arrived and surrounded our house. They did not believe us when we informed them that father was not at home. They discussed

the option of searching the house, by getting permission from the authorities. After many hours of waiting for him to return, they retreated in disappointment.

“Other creditors came to hear of this incident. They initiated procedures to swiftly recover their money too. Mr. Chacku was aggrieved on hearing of these developments. He was quite rich and known to keep his word. ‘They did not believe my word to wait for some time. Let me see how they are going to recover their money now.’ Mr. Chacku was resolute in his decision. He gave my father money, which was just enough to escape arrest. Much to his chagrin, my father’s efforts to repay his debts turned futile. Matters worsened because of the impatience of a Catholic who was also his compatriot, while creditors from other religions were prepared to wait. If only he had waited for some more time, everything would have been amicably resolved. This also led to huge financial losses for our family. The man was much hated by people. He was also forced to keep paying money to the court.

“One day, he visited us quite innocuously. To my surprise, my father welcomed him with joy and invited him to have breakfast with us. He was ashamed of his thoughtlessness when he saw my father’s courteous behaviour. He blushed and was clearly embarrassed. While at the table, my father quietly recounted the pain he went through because of the man, and then declared that he forgave him. The scene had to be seen to be believed.”

Lessons from My Strict Disciplinarian Elder Brother

Fr. Dunston remembers that his elder brother used to punish him harshly for any mistakes he committed, and that, it helped mellow him down a lot.

“Once (before I was five) I had a skirmish with my sister Mary. In a fit of rage, I uttered an obscene word. Immediately, my brother came in and hit me. Since then, I have never uttered any such word. Moreover, as there had been no opportunity to hear such words uttered at home by anyone in my family, it was quite easy for me to be careful in this regard. I used to avoid even those words of which I was doubtful. Children from other families would not dare to use such language when in our house. My brother was extremely strict in this matter. He would not mind as to who it was, or where it occurred. Despite criticism that his reaction was ‘a little out of proportion’, my brother never toned it down.”

Obstinate by Birth

“Kochumathu, the son of my uncle Ayppunni, staying at Mattam, was a very headstrong child. Of all the children of my aunt, I had the most respect for him. I used to look after him when he was about two or three. I found his reflectiveness, obstinance and manner of talking and playing quite alluring. I expected he would become a priest. It seems that his father used to console his wife, my aunt, when she would punish him for inappropriate behaviour: ‘There is no problem if children are little bit obstinate in their childhood. Look how Anotty Ittooppunni has changed!’

Yes, I was quite obstinate and angry as a child. If I was served hot gruel, it would make me angry. And if I were served hot curry with it, my anger would be out of bounds. I remember kicking the gruel plate with my leg once. Luckily, the atmosphere at my home was not one that entertained such antics.”

Experiences That Led to a Paradigm Shift

“I had not striven hard for anything as much as I did to control my temper. By God’s grace I happened to be victorious in that struggle. I was not short tempered. So, for others, my anger was not something visible. Short tempered people seem to be able to either forget the cause of their anger or regret losing their temper. It would be relatively easy for them to be mollified. However, this was not my situation. As I was a person who was basically rational, my anger was based on logic. I never used to get angry without reason. Hence, I did not have to feel sorry for my outburst. Consequently, it also left a lasting impression within me. It would not leave my memory soon. Instead, I felt it was biding its time until revenge was extracted.”

Ittooppunni’s stubbornness and anger were a hurdle in his spiritual growth. Yet, the steely resolve to become a saint, his unreserved cooperation to the light of faith and grace that God granted him gradually, as well as his positive response to the inner call right from childhood, to surmount this evil habit acted as a nourishment. Right from his childhood, Ittooppunni went through his experiences in life as a continuous metanoia. Fr. Dunston gives an account of his life-changing experiences that occurred when he was five to seven years of age.

“When I was playing with my cousin, from Mattam, we got involved in a quarrel. However, he was physically stronger than me, and, as a result, I lost for the moment. Those days, when a child lost a quarrel, the vanquished would say, ‘I will avenge my defeat when you are asleep tonight.’ I loudly claimed the same, and thus, consoled myself. ‘We have heard children say such things many a time,

but have never seen them do anything of that sort.’ Thus was the comment by some who heard me challenging him. Children by nature do not keep their word in such cases. Whatever the gravity of their quarrel they would forget it the next moment and start playing again.

“But, for me, I meant what I said. We went our separate ways immediately. We did not play together again that day. I waited for him to retire to bed. As he was preparing his bed, I crept up behind him, gave him a pinch and ran away. I expected him to come after me. But, he did not. His lack of response made me think. I did not feel victorious, or thrilled. The time for spiritual reasoning had not yet taken hold. Still, even without my knowledge, I had begun to kickstart the war against this vice. This dissatisfaction with myself gradually transformed into a natural, yet hazy inspiration. I had to wait for almost a year for this inspiration to crystallize into a determination.”

“Another mistake that I committed, about which I regretted a lot and ensured I never repeated again, happened when I was at elementary school at Puthumanasserry. We had Catechism after class, at 4 pm. We had a Sir (*Ashaan*) to teach us. On several occasions, he would come only after all other teachers had left. There would not be anyone to control the children in that interim period. If the *Ashaan* was late, the instruction was to sit quietly, and study. However, children would go out, talk, quarrel and play. When *Ashaan* came, in the midst of this commotion, he used to punish everyone equally. He would not try to see who the culprits were. He would strike the knees of students from one end of the class to the other. That was the first ritual when he came late. I was quite unhappy about this but wouldn’t show it.

“One day when, as was customary, *Ashaan* continued this ritual, I was much pained. I felt this injustice had to be changed. So, I played out a performance, which I despised before and after this incident. As I have seen naughty children do, I spoke arrogantly to the *Ashaan*, and was about to run out of the class. However, my courage failed me by the time I reached the door. I had always had the arrogant attitude of being the manager’s son. I even used to take the time-piece home every day, while entertaining the haughty thought: ‘Let me see how will they know the time to stop the class when I take it home.’ That day, the *Ashaan* did not punish me, though he was a little taken aback by my behaviour. I don’t remember him saying anything at all. Yet, since then, I felt ashamed of putting on such an act.”

Here is another incident that touched Itoopunni’s life: “A student sitting behind me started poking his finger at the back of my head. When I turned back at him every time, he would look at me with an innocent look. I understood he was playing with me. So, I stopped turning back. Yet, I looked back stealthily to find out the culprit. After some time, I found out who it was. Immediately I caught his hand and bit him. The headmaster swiftly came over and admonished me. I do not remember what punishment was given. I was not perturbed by his scolding or punishment. He did not use any argument from the Bible to exhort me. Instead, he appealed to my intellect.

“Being from a respectable family, his words reminded me that it was not becoming of me to take revenge thus. I also understood that when difficulties arose from friends, I should not take it upon myself to punish them; instead, I need to report such incidents to my teachers, and have them sorted out.

“The headmaster was a person who loved me much. As my father was the manager, he used to frequent my home, both to take the salary and to discuss matters regarding the school. On such occasions, he used to place me on his lap and cuddle me. That such a person, who, without even saying a word of castigation to the boy who had provoked me, instead, scolded and punished only me, was an unforgettable experience. I understood that taking revenge was a big mistake and hence the punishment. He grew in my esteem and love. I remember him with gratitude for acting smart enough to make me feel ashamed of my wrongdoing. Henceforth, nobody had an occasion to find fault with me.”

Learning Forgiveness Is Painful

“Soon after the aforementioned incident, I was presented with supernatural reasoning from home to impede from taking revenge. That is how total and lasting, the transformation was accomplished in me. However, one has to go through the crucible of suffering before achieving a calm demeanour.

“From the moment I was conscious that vengefulness and hatred were sin and not in keeping with decency and if one behaves thus, be it at home or school, one would be punished, I was filled with anxieties. I felt helpless whenever I witnessed these signs of weakness. As retaliation was no longer an option, I had to suffer patiently. I was yet to understand the eminence of suffering.”

When Ittooppunni tried to control and suppress his anger without the help of supernatural reasoning, there was a drastic change in his very nature. Such a variation pushed him into a state of despair.

“When anger and revenge were proscribed, yet another disposition started to express itself in me. I started to sob inconsolably in situations where I would get angry. As I said in the beginning, hot gruel would make me angry. But now, it made me cry. Such experiences wrought a sense of despondency in me regarding life. I remember thinking thus before I was eight: ‘How good it would have been if God had not created me? How immense are the afflictions I am made to suffer! What is the guarantee that I would reach heaven after I die?’ I was often perturbed by such thoughts. I remember standing desolate on my way from school to home immersed in such disturbing considerations.

“I was recounting the incidents that occurred when I was about seven. By the time I crossed seven, I started to turn victorious over myself in various challenges. I recall being very cautious in my approach. One day, food was served late, and I was very hungry. If I stood in the kitchen, I knew, I would break down at any time. Hence, I went to rest in the veranda on the southern side. My aunt called out to me when the food was finally prepared. I did not respond. Since I did not respond despite repeated reminders, she wanted to know why. I responded: ‘Now, the gruel will be hot. If I come to take it now, I might get angry.’

“By the time I crossed my childhood, I came to understand that there is a positive side to anger and stubbornness. I started to respect stubbornness since it implied determination.”

Ittooppunni received First Holy Communion at the point of time in his life, when he was pushed into despair following the consistent efforts to control his temper. “I approached

those blessed moments with a deeply parched mind and a withered heart”:

“The day of my First Holy Communion was close. I felt I was much older than I was at that time. My father explained to me lucidly the parts from the Catechism book that dealt with the Holy Eucharist. In those days, there were no separate arrangements for the children preparing to receive the Holy Communion neither in the parish nor in the monastery. My mother sent me to the monastery. I met Fr. Cornelius and informed him of the matter. He explained a lot to me in this regard. Contrary to my desire and expectations, I did not experience any supernatural rush of piety. I fathomed that it was a great day for my family members. I prepared myself as best as I could. The next day, I was dressed and sent to the monastery with my brother. I met Fr. Seraphin in the visitors’ room and sought his exhortation. He gave me certain advice for some time but, it did not have any effect on me. What I felt on that day was only scant faith.”

Prevailing over Despondency

God did not forsake Ittooppunni even when he fell into a hole of despair in life. The providential grace of God that aided him to sail through the challenging situations was the light in the darkness that surrounded him. Fr. Dunston writes that the grace of God, faith and above all, the determination to become a saint were the rescue vessels that lifted him from the depths of despair.

“The grace of God and the light of faith was freely available to me since I was five years old; so, I was able to gradually redeem myself from desperation. Faith in God as well as the principled convictions based on the truths of faith

(*viswaasa sathyanghal*) taught by the Catholic Church lent life and zeal, thus leading to my redemption.

“As the yearning to become a saint grew, I desired to live at least till I became a saint. Yet, I wanted to die soon so that India would get a saint at the earliest. I continued to pray for the same. The belief that God would heed to my prayer was quite comforting to me. The thought that I wouldn’t have to suffer for long added zing to the moments of suffering. Those moments which could be suspected to be the beginnings of a serious ailment, gave me immense joy. I was consoled by the notion of my looming death. When at the age of 24, I contracted an illness on my leg (eczema), I became a patient in the eyes of all. I lost all hope of being cured. However, this time it was clear that I had overcome my despondency that began when I had tried to repress my anger. This happened only when I was at the hospital in Chethipuzha. I was even referred to as an optimist by a person. The desire to become a saint, thus gave me the necessary strength to win over the feeling of dejection.”

Ittooppunni continued to battle against this vice even as he grew in age:

“I had to struggle against the tendency to get angry, a tendency that manifested in my childhood, and continued even when I was advanced in age. Even when I suffered from memory loss, I had no loss of memory in this regard. There were days when I spent the whole day seething with rage. Though I did not give in purposefully, I had to spend days together to overcome this emotion. It was indeed a cause of inordinate suffering. This was during the time when I used to spend time in ceaseless prayers and effort to overcome my weakness.”

Fr. Dunston compares the inability of his mind to forgive to the sea waves. The sea roars at a distance. The waves rise high and gradually diminishes in its intensity as it reaches the beach. When everything seems to have subsided, lo, there comes another high tide from the deep sea. Upon God, it doesn't seem to end!

He continued his endeavours to control his anger even after his priestly ordination. He used to talk about his experiences at Ayiroor and Manimala, with a sense of accomplishment, as he could meet different people, involve himself in difficult situations and yet practise love of the neighbour. These experiences acted as pillars of strength that gave him courage wherever he went. Once, recounting his experiences at Ayiroor, he said: "There were several nights when I went to bed without supper." There was a particular reason for going to bed without supper. He could not forget things. The wounded memories haunted him out of sleep. If he did not eat, his body would be tired and he would slip into sleep. Fr. Dunston felt strengthened wherever he went due to such experiences. He grew in maturity and holiness. There were several miraculous instances when he experienced the liberating influence of forgiveness. He could now authoritatively advise on how to forgive.

Without Hatred against Anyone

It was a rather long and strife-ridden journey for the naturally short-tempered Ittooppunni, from onewho kicked the plate of hot gruel to give vent to his anger, and who found satisfaction in waiting for the right moment to take revenge, to Fr. Dunston who could never hate those who harmed him.

The ability to forgive and seek forgiveness turned out to be a part of his spiritual life and grew into a mark of his

spirituality. "Lord, forgive me! Lord, pardon me!" became his regular ejaculatory prayer. Fr. Dunston, who stood hands outstretched before the Crucified Lord to seek forgiveness, was very particular to seek forgiveness and grant forgiveness to others. His age was never an obstacle in seeking or granting pardon.

When he was Prior at Varandarapilly, some parishioners happened to hurt Fr. Dunston. However, he did not distance himself from any of them. He went to their houses and spoke to them. He spoke to them peaceably and tried for reconciliation.

Once he happened to be giving an exhortation for the monthly recollection at Christ Monastery, Irinjalakuda wherein he shared his own experience: "There has been only two instances when I had felt difficult with others." When he was a young priest, his Prior asked him to offer Holy Eucharist at a parish church. He acceded to the Prior's order though with a slight difficulty in mind: "How could Fr. Prior ask me to go when I am down with fever!" Those who heard his words were mesmerised. His listeners saw it as a witness to the sanctity of the life of Fr. Dunston.

Even when his memory started failing him, the discernment between good and evil was very much alive in him. Sometimes, he would get angry and slightly hit himself with his hand. The very next moment, he would seek pardon, when he became conscious of his mistake.

Once Fr. Dunston had a tiff with the brother who was taking care of him. After the brother had gone to play, he reached the ground seeking him, as he was conscious of having committed a mistake. Being involved in the game, the brother did not notice Fr. Dunston. And so, he waited till the

game was over. After the game, Fr. Dunston went behind the novice. "What do you want Father?" asked the brother. "If I have wronged you, no, I did wrong you; forgive me." Such an innocent way of seeking forgiveness re-established their relationship.

Perseverance in Accepting Physical Suffering Too

He exhibited heroic patience in physical pain. He would remark, "It hurts, but it's okay." on such occasions. Once he was having difficulties in opening his mouth and eating food due to the flaring up of arthritis. When medications did not help, he sought solace in prayer to accept God's Will.

Fr. Dunston was the Rector of Aspirants at Kaundampalayam seminary in 1996. The annual retreat for the aspirants that year was led by Bro. Stanley and team. The aspirants were receiving miraculous healings on a daily basis. As the retreat was progressing, the retreat preacher suddenly proclaimed, "God is healing the eczema of Fr. Dunston." Immediately, Fr. Dunston, who was involved in praise and worship, exclaimed intuitively, "Oh, how unfortunate!" Later, he explained: "I had begun to look upon the ailment as a blessing from God, for me to bear. So, when I was told that it had been taken away, I felt sad." Nevertheless, this ailment which had bothered him for more than 52 years, did not occur again.

Messenger of Reconciliation in the Path of Formation

Fr. Dunston desired to see the lessons of forgiveness that he followed in life imbued in the aspirants. So, he took care to involve himself wisely in matters involving the community, and sort out issues amicably.

Once when he took over as Aspirant Rector, he had to minister to a group who had suffered several abuses from their former Rector. He did not deem it necessary to probe into the weaknesses of his predecessor. His sole aim was the formation of the aspirants. For the person with a backbone strengthened by spirituality and wisdom, goal-setting is not a problem. He catered to the wounded lambs. He got involved only to heal them by gifting them the power of forgiveness to forgive the one who had hurt and wounded them. He trained them to see everything through a spiritual eye. The disciples later bore witness to the success of their master's efforts.

An aspirant at Varandarappilly seminary was very short-tempered. He was quite obstinate too. The boy used to regularly quarrel while playing and in the class with Fr. Zacchaeus, his teacher. One day, Father asked him a question in the class. The grudge of the previous day's tiff with father during the games on the previous day had not cooled down. He stood there without answering. The question was repeated several times. The Aspirant did not open his mouth. Father became angry. He commanded the student to get out of the class. He did not obey that too. It was only when the students got involved that he budged.

When Fr. Dunston came to know of the matter, without losing his cool, he lovingly took him to his room. He consoled and advised him at length. As instructed by Fr. Dunston, the aspirant went in person to Fr. Zacchaeus' room, sought his pardon thus resolving the issue. He witnesses that he could never forget the love and concern that Fr. Dunston showed him on the day.

Fr. Dunston always took care to heal the wounds in interpersonal relationships during formation. The advice he gave when going through a problem has invariably produced long-lasting fruits in their lives. Some have found that his exhortations stood as a panacea for recurring problems throughout their lives. Even after several years, they feel the loving presence of Fr. Dunston in their lives.

Chapter 5

AN ETERNAL PILGRIM IN THE PATH OF TRUTH

The underlying trait in the remarkable personality of Fr. Dunston was his love for truth. He used to pinpoint this love for truth as the foundation of his wellbeing. He says: “The real foundation and beginning of my good fortune is the Catholic faith coupled with my love for my country. Having initiated the work of my life upon these grounds, I later saw everything crumbling down. When I was on the verge of despair, it was this love for truth that acted as the bedrock for my revival.”

He was always perturbed by the thought that he had not reached the desired realm in spiritual matters. He often told himself “I have reached nowhere.” Hence, he was passionate in his search for the divine. It was on this quest that he discovered honesty to be the successful path for perfection.

Love for truth had bud forth in Ittooppunni very early in his life. Personal convictions and understanding on honesty grew within. The training imparted by parents and the family were conducive factors to grow rooted in love for truth. Ittooppunni was largely influenced by his mother’s determination and her habit of keeping her word. Fr. Dunton writes:

“I had strong faith in the promises of my mother, because she never went back on her word. I understood this very early in life. Even when times were difficult, I was able to get whatever I wanted from her, by just reminding her of her promises. My mother would not step back from what she had

decided. Despite her longstanding ailments, she was the actual decision-maker in our family. She would prevail over difficult situations with grit and fortitude.” This is the witness by a son about his mother. This dedication of his mother, to keep her word whatever be the obstacles before her, deeply influenced her son.

Fr. Dunston himself gives a detailed account of how the grace for love of truth grew as though nurtured by nature, and how it blossomed, ultimately trouncing the natural cowardice in him:

“The one virtue that has persisted in me without much of a defeat is the love for truth. This is almost like an inborn virtue. Most other virtues I remember to have failed and later won back. However, this one is not like that. As a child I had lied for trifles. It was usually to get attention from others by explaining something. But, when I was asked for the truth, I did not purposefully lie.

“I was very much into sports. However, I would involve myself only in such sports and such friends that would be acceptable at home. During playtime, if the children had a quarrel and stopped the game for some reason, I would be prepared to make any adjustment, as long as I could play. But I wouldn’t go along if they lied. Despite my keen desire to win, I could play for the sake of playing without any concern for whether I win or lose.

“I have been a coward since birth. But, God granted me a love for truth so strong as to prevail over this cowardice. There was a raging battle between these two sides of mine, from childhood. By God’s grace, I always emerged successful. The aforementioned instance of lying over trifles, happened before this conflict within, and before I had given

it any serious thought. From the day I received the First Holy Communion, I got into the habit of introspection. If I had knowingly gone astray in this regard, it wouldn't have been easy for me to forget it. I have examined my conscience, and scrutinised my entire life in this regard, beginning from childhood.

“From the time I was aware that lying – in any situation or form – amounts to at least a small sin, not only did I never attempt to do so again, but I also tried to dissuade others from lying, by reminding them of the sin inherent in it. When friends would lie, I remember to have reminded them that it was a sin to be confessed thus persuading them against it. I believed that one wouldn't venture to commit a sin if one remembered that committing a sin involves confession. I assumed that my experience with lying, would be the same as that of others.

“I was not only averse to lying but also had much love for truth. It continued to grow in me as I continued to cooperate with God's grace. I am ever grateful to God for this ineffable gift.

“Though my understanding of truth and my love towards it grew in course of time, from very early on in life, I had begun to respect the conscience, which is a part of truth, or its dual form. I did not blindly follow others' opinions. On the other hand, I connected with my conscience with proper reasoning. And, once I did so, I was not willing to neglect my conscience for anything. This caused me a lot of suffering at first, because among the hurt inflicted by others, those that were related to matters of the conscience would affect me.”

Humility as the Foundation for Love of Truth

Once an aspirant lost his umbrella. He was very sad and was in tears. Fr. Dunston, his master, tried hard to console him. But the aspirant would not be consoled. He continued to shed tears profusely. In fact, his grief was not because he lost the umbrella. "How could I commit such a mistake?" "Why did this blunder happen on my part?" Thus went his reasoning.

The aspirant's grief lay in his inability to digest the slip-up that happened. Fr. Dunston discerned that in his own case also, it was his lack of humility that was the basic reason for these tantrums. It was a fact that a gaffe has been committed. But, the aspirant was not able to accept the fact and honestly acknowledge the truth because of his pride. Only the humble can accept the truth. Understanding one's weakness and accepting it augurs well for one to trust God. Here, one grows in the resolute hope of God's mercy. Without humility, one covers failings with arguments and excuses. This obstructs blessings of God in the person; it retards spiritual growth.

The humble Fr. Dunston loved truth profoundly right through his life. He compared love for truth and humility, differentiated them, observed their standing in his life and manifested them.

"It is said that humility is the foundation of all virtues. The foundation of humility or rather, humility itself, is the love of truth.

"I found it arduous to hide my inadequacies from those around me by covering up the truth about myself. I almost announced all my secrets to the world until I remembered the importance of practising the virtue of prudence. It was the love of truth that helped me - a coward by birth and one, naturally shy - to start all over again to become a saint by

acknowledging my sinfulness. It dawned on me then, that even after years of trying to be a saint, I still remained a poor sinner. Through this new-found realisation, I found grace in the presence of my Lord. My repentance did not turn into a futile despair; instead, I could gain a strong, new life and continue in its vitality all through my life. It's been many years since I finally discovered that spiritual life is all about love of truth."

Love for Truth as the Foundation for a Life of Holiness

As a scholastic, Fr. Dunston was compelled to deliver a speech while he was at Chethipuzha in 1943; and, he presented a well-prepared speech on the topic 'Love for Truth'.

He explains: "The whole of my life of virtue is a 'love for truth'. Love the truth. Jesus has said that 'I am the Truth'. There is only one truth: That is God. Every sin consists of a practical rejection of the truth that God is the Sovereign, and that we are all bound to fulfil His Will.

"Every sin is an untruth. Lie is a formulation contrary to common knowledge. It is a sin when one acts against the conscience. The one who loves truth strives to extricate oneself from ignorance and falsehood. A virtuous life is an expression of the love for truth.

Some say that humility is the fountainhead of all virtues, while others opine that it is faith. Everyone would accede that both statements are true. Does that mean humility and faith are the same? Yes, both are the expressions of the same truth; a proclamation of the creative act of God. Declaring that God is the Creator, is faith. Acknowledging oneself as a creature,

is humility. Thus, all that one could wish for is included in the love for truth. God and everything godly are in it.”

Following the Footsteps of St. Thomas More

In his dedicated attempt to hold on to honesty in its perfection in life, St. Thomas More was the guiding light for Fr. Dunston.

Thomas More was the bosom friend and confidant of King Henry VIII of Britain. King Henry removed Cardinal Wolsey as Lord Chancellor, blaming him for not being conscientious in working for the annulment of his marriage to Catherine, his first wife. In the place of Cardinal Wolsey, the king installed Thomas More, his close friend. Henry intended to buy the loyalty of More, by offering this very prized position.

However, Thomas More would not go along with the king's decision to reject his first wife and marry another woman. The Pope refused permission to the king. Enraged by this denial, Henry declared himself to be the leader of the Church in England. He commanded his subjects to sign and acknowledge the declaration. Cardinal Wolsey and the priests easily gave in to the royal decree. More's daughter obeyed the king. Yet, Thomas More did not concede to any temptation and stood by the voice of his conscience. He abdicated the Chancellorship and refused to accept the privilege of being the amigo of the king. He stood by his Catholic faith and was prepared to take on martyrdom as he refused to sign the declaration.

King Henry was flustered by the opposing stance of More. He tried to bring Thomas More around through temptations, threats and tried to influence him and change his stance, through various people. Many counselled him to give in to

the king's wish. More was a man who dearly wished to live. As a result of the king's harassments, he went through several weary sleepless nights. Yet, he vanquished all worldly desires and fears. He came up trumps over all of them with his sheer determination. He acted only according to his conscience.

He did not accuse or insult those who sided with the king. He did not want to interfere with the freedom of anyone; he did not judge anyone. He believed in the integrity of their conscience and unique personality of the other. He did not lose his characteristic humour despite the one-and-a-half years in the prison. Even when haunted by ailments, he did not lose sight of his forgiveness nor give up his pleasant nature. He faced the gradual increase in persecutions with dignity and a calm disposition.

More presented his case only after it was confirmed that he was to be hanged. Until then he had only maintained that he could not fulfil the biddings of the king. He presented his lofty vision to King Henry and courageously bore the consequences.

Thomas More was canonized in 1935. Ittooppunni was 15 years old then, and he believed that God gave him an intercessor at that age. He clarifies on the reason for choosing this saint as his patron. We can round up the thoughts that lie scattered in the memoirs of Fr. Dunston in his own words:

“For, which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ...Or, which king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able, with ten thousand soldiers, to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?” (Luke

14:28, 31). As a youth, Thomas More had showed no inclination towards religious life. Like many others, he did not venture into such a life impulsively. He pondered long on whether it would suit him. He joined the Carthusian Order and spent a few days there in prayer and abstinence. He discussed the issue with his spiritual director. Assuming that the burden of religious life would be difficult for him, he decided to get married. We are not sure whether he factored in heavenly assistance while taking the call.

“However, in the last days of his life, when he prepared himself for martyrdom, he gave the first place to trust in God. The wise More foresaw the state of affairs. When he saw signs of his imminent execution, he prepared himself and his family members to accept, worthily and with equanimity, the possible grief. Knowing that great suffering was fast approaching, he spoke to his wife and children about topics such as: heavenly bliss, misery in hell, lives of the holy martyrs, their unconscionable forgiveness, and the ineffable suffering and the heinous death they accepted rather than affront God. He strove to convince them how blessed it was, to give up material comforts, or live a life in prison or even accept death for the sake of the love of God.

“He was still not satisfied by these things. It is said that he played a practical joke in order to teach and test his family members. He arranged two or three people. They were to come home as the royal soldiers to arrest More. Thus, he endeavoured to overcome the fears that may still remain in his family members and above all, in him. He deemed it his responsibility to prepare them for the impending afflictions.

“He decries the attempts to console individuals on death bed who were afraid to die as a result of their sinful lives. He

would just tell them that nothing would happen to them, and would not advise them to repent or hope for God's mercy. He did not seek consolation and peace in speaking ineffective words and thinking unnecessary thoughts. St. Thomas More loved truth very much. He did not intend to get things his way by rejecting truth. More prepared himself for a cruel death.

“He says he is a coward by nature. Since he was frightened of suffering and death, he meditated more on them. When he returned home after resigning his job at the royal court, he built a tomb for himself and wrote an epitaph on it. He was thus preparing for his death. He was getting ready for the agonies of the morrow.”

Fr. Dunston found his ideal in Thomas More, who voluntarily laid down his life for truth, fighting valiantly in the battle between good and evil. He learnt from this saint, the principle that, once convinced of an ideal, one should not waver from it no matter how strong the threats or temptations.

Fr. Dunston was greatly impressed by the extensive preparations that Thomas More, a self-proclaimed coward, made for the approaching torments. He compared his ordeals with those of the saint, in order to overcome his limitations that would make him worthy of the martyr's crown and the dispositions of Thomas More. He details his shy nature, and how he struggled to overcome it.

He confesses that one of the limitations he foresaw in his vocation was his cowardice. He wrangled with the fear to appear before others from his childhood. The motivation to overcome this trepidation came from his fervid craving to

become a saint. The virtue of obedience also provided much strength. Father continues:

“Our Lord has said in the Gospel that one who starts to build should first create a plan and prepare a budget; then, one should check whether he would be able to complete it. From childhood, around the age of five or six, I started making plans about my future. I used to ponder over the path my future would take, and the possible difficulties. Until the desire to become a saint gained momentum, such thinking would lead me to despair. Later, as I was nearing my First Holy Communion, this feeling of helplessness gave way to confidence and this reflective gave me much courage. It helped me to be prepared. I drew strength from the faith in God’s providence and began to trust in Him. God would grant me signs of forthcoming sufferings. He would lead me to sufferings after preparing me beforehand. That is why my composure in the face of the sufferings would surprise others. Even before I entered the congregation, my policy was ‘to be prepared for the worst.’ This way I could be very much at peace. I would sometimes shudder at the coming miseries. Then, I would turn to the Lord and pray; and, peace would prevail.

“If God’s design for me included a period of suffering, I would get satisfaction from the hope that He would provide me the necessary strength to bear it. In normal cases, Our Lord would grant me the grace to joyfully await the difficult situation. However, I have not yet received the courage to accept bodily tortures using weapons. I have not been forced to receive such a suffering even in a minute degree. From childhood, I would wonder how I would respond if required to be a martyr. I would frequently imagine a death caused by cruel tortures. I have since then gotten over these fears. Since

the time I joined the congregation, I have prayed for the strength to die for the sake of God.

“My policy is not to stop thinking and run away from the things that causes grief. We should face the issue that causes fear and remove the fear itself. Fear may be of the mind or of the senses. To obliterate mental fear, we need to eliminate the reason for fear.

“Through prayer and hard work, we need to assure the mind of the truth that there is no evil other than sin. If sin is the reason for dread, we know the ways to redeem ourselves. If there is fear over something other than sin, it is due to some misunderstanding. Such fears can be dispelled only when one comprehends truth. Meditating on the eternal truths can lend a hand in this regard. Fear of the senses ought to be neglected. We can do so by repeatedly drawing near the source of our fear. We have seen how the bulls are gradually made to pull the cart. When they come on to the road for the first time, they might run amok seeing vehicles whirring past. With time they get used to it and fear subsides. Hence, we should overcome any sort of fear, not by merely closing the eyes to them or depending on untruths. On the contrary, we should do so by facing them. We should either obliterate the source of the fear, or get closer to that which induces the fear.

“We need to hold on to these principles even when we are trying to console others. There are people who try to console those who are sick and approaching death saying that they won’t die. Even in matters not grave as death, such people move around giving momentary relief to the dying, by speaking untruths or using weak reasoning. They escape from reality, or their present situation, by predicting that an imminent misery will not come to be. We could compare

them to the astrologers who go around predicting future looking at the face (*kaniyaan*). Despite their good intentions they do much harm. When somebody is in fear, we need to either help eliminate the source of fear or prepare them to face that which induces that fear, with calmness.

“Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.’ (Matthew 6:34) When Our Lord says so, He does not ask us to not think about tomorrow; instead, he wants us not to be worried. Our heavenly Father will not test us beyond our strength. We will not be compelled to handle the greater adversities of tomorrow based on the abilities we possess today. When God sends more burdens tomorrow, He wouldn’t fail to send more strength to us.

“When I was in grade 1 (5 years old), I would get terrified on seeing the headmaster, with a heavy stick, beating up the grade 4 students (about 10 years old) as they were made to stand up on the bench. I was alarmed thinking how I would manage when I reach that grade. A consoling thought dawned up on me after a few days. “By that time, I will be older. Adults do not have much fear. Then I will manage somehow.”

If God grants us the necessary strength for the following day’s burdens, we might ask God about the need to think about tomorrow. A servant’s daily wages must be sufficient to take care of all the needs of his large family for a single day. Even as a bachelor, it is his duty to save a small amount that would come to his aid later, when he gets married and has children.

“When we say that God would provide us with the strength to accept the burdens of tomorrow, it does not mean

that we should not contribute our mite towards it. What is meant here is this: If we have to endure sufferings, which require strength to overcome, our efforts to do so will be acknowledged by God, who will give us the strength. We are duty bound to use natural and supernatural means to develop the natural and supernatural strengths and God-given abilities and bring them to perfection. God expects it from us. The parable of the talents and that of the fig tree are proof of this truth. If the one who does not do so repents, confesses one's sin and seeks God's blessing, the merciful God will grant him strength. If someone shirks his duty and merely waits, he is also granted the necessary strength, not because he acted right; instead, it is because God sees their earnestness.

"It is good to imagine beforehand of how you would behave in possible situations that are contrary to your will. This would be an excellent way to prepare your mind. It does not mean that one should think about the sufferings that might come one's way and live in fear and sorrow. The possible situations may or may not become a reality. Why should one worry about things that may never happen? To cut a long story short, what I mean to say is that we need to be prepared for any eventuality. We can seek the necessary strength from God. God will not require impossible things from us.

"I pursued this policy from very early in my life. I have heard about a saint who did this way once in a year in the refectory after I joined the congregation. As a result, he could vouch for the fact that nothing beyond his expectation had ever happened to him. He could accept any suffering with due preparation. I do not remember the name of the saint. That hagiography emboldened me to continue this practice

regarding fear. After I heard about St. Thomas More, I happily discovered that he was my exemplar. I loved him intensely.

“When we love others, more often than not, we are loving ourselves. It is when we find the good in us to be present in others that we specially love them. We cannot but love the one in whom we find a reflection of what we are, or of our ideals in one or the other way. If we love ourselves, we will love such a person, as he is considered to be a part of us.

“I see a major chunk of my ideals permeating in St. Thomas More. He is my saint. My love towards him increases with every passing year. I have been reading parts of his biography whenever time permits during the past six to seven years. I have not been able to read many of his works. I deeply desire to read at least the ones he had written when he was in prison. They may contain several things that could embolden me.

“Martyrs have laid down their lives heeding to the voice of their conscience. St. Thomas More is a saint who, from among the martyrs I know, not only argued for but was also prepared to give himself up to a long term in the jail and even court death for the sake of freedom of the conscience. He only besought not to be forced against his conscience; he did not sing paeans to the logic of the truths that he held high nor did he judge those who belittled them. He took to this stand only after years of strenuous study to assuage his conscience on the truth of the issues that were under contention. It was not mere obstinacy.

“Despite being timid by nature, he had the courage based on his trust in God, to suffer for God and to comprehend and esteem the truth, as well as to act accordingly. Yet, he also

had the humility and wisdom to patiently wait until God led him to the truth. These characteristics led me to deem St. Thomas More as my very own. I have read his biography repeatedly. Every time I did, I felt him to be worthier of emulating. His life, especially his last days, have influenced and guided my life a lot.”

As Fr. Dunston himself claims, he was very attracted by the ideals of St. Thomas More. The saint became a crucial influencing factor in his life. Firstly, we ought to listen to the voice of the conscience. That voice and our listening must be founded on faith. We should forego everything else and follow that voice. Our relationships should not be a hindrance. Fr. Dunston was a personification of these virtues and ideals.

The Witness of the Unfinished House

Fr. Dunston endeavoured to walk in the path of truth as he desired to absorb the whole truth in his thoughts, words and deeds. He turned out into a living witness of honesty.

Fr. Raphael Kannanaickal recounts: “The honesty and earnestness of Fr. Dunston was always an inspiration for me. His example helped me to a great extent to take firm decisions correctly and to implement them. I have sought his advice on some tricky situations and that gave me much light.”

It was the time when the novitiate house at Saravanampatti was under construction. Fr. Raphael was in charge. Cement was very difficult to procure. The work was going on at a good pace with the cement obtained as per permit. With permission from authorities, a truckload of cement was purchased from the black market at a higher price. When Fr. Dunston came to know of it, he said, “We

don't need this business." "We may have to stop the work." Fr. Raphael responded. "Then, let us stop the work. The unfinished, building may be the greatest witness. We shall answer to those who ask for the reason."

He had a similar stand about the 'service charge' aka bribe that was exchanged to purchase land or to obtain permissions for institutions. He used to take an uncompromising stand with bold argumentations against injustice, in the meetings of the congregation. Our hero was a stout-hearted prophet who could strongly present his convictions.

While at Ayiroor monastery, the Superior ordered him to sign a document. He disobeyed the Superior since it was against his conscience. The incident led to the longest trail of suffering in his life.

There is an aided school under the aegis of the Varandarappilly monastery. The practice was that the headmaster prepares the accounts annually, gets the signature from Fr. Prior and presents it to the government. The grant will be released after checking these accounts. As per this practice, the headmaster approached Fr. Dunston, then manager, to get his initials. While going through the accounts, he found some entries under expenses, which were not real. "We need to show that we have spent the whole amount received from the government. If we spend less, we will not get the whole amount. It is quite common to show some adjustments. There is no problem." The headmaster answered the query raised by Fr. Dunston. Being honest, Fr. Dunston could not consent to that usual practice. He refused to receive the grant that required dishonest accounting. Thus, he reaffirmed the pristine nature of his life.

Once when he was teaching the novices, he said, "How can we be always honest in this world? Is it possible to get things done without offering bribes? Imagine that I take you to the government hospital when you are sick. May be no one will turn to our side until we offer the doctor a bribe. What will you think if I stand firm that I will not pay a bribe? 'Why is father such a miser? If only he gives a little money as bribe, I will be attended to. As a patient, I need not bear this pain.'" He presented a practical difficulty. Probably, he had faced a similar situation earlier in his life. "How can we be always honest in this world?" He repeated the question again. The novices did not answer.

An Ocean of Equanimity

Fr. Dunston wished to be honest always and everywhere. The Congregation had complete faith in him on this matter. He had imbibed the spiritual courage to stand on his own for truth without taking sides.

During elections in the congregation, the community would approach Fr. Dunston for guidance to choose the right candidates. The community strongly believed that this free bird, shorn of all selfishness, would stand for the common good. He attempted to bring together and commingle through open discussions those who had different perspectives and contrasting viewpoints. He did not encourage secret negotiations. Once during the Provincial Synaxis, in the morning after electing the Provincial, some members retired to their own rooms while others were involved in card games. Fr. Dunston was not at all pleased with such behaviour. This was not the time for playing around. The Councillors were yet to be elected and it had to be discussed. He was seen to be going about tapping the back

of some of those playing cards to remind them of their responsibility.

Once, there was a tussle between the authorities and the people, about a plan to start a college as part of the monastery at Varandarappilly. There was a need for a just and wise Prior to sort out this serious issue. The members of the monastery suggested the name of Fr. Dunston. As per their request, Fr. Dunston was appointed as the Prior. Having ironed out the confusions in a just manner acceptable to all stakeholders, the ground was prepared for the college to be established.

It was on 11 March 1979, that the CMI Coimbatore Vice province was carved out of Devamatha Province, Thrissur. Certain confusions remained as to the boundaries of the two provinces. Fr. Dunston was the leader of the committee constituted by Preshitha vice province for resolving this issue. The reason for his appointment was the community's resounding belief that Fr. Dunston had the wisdom and sense of justice required to carefully study the matter with poise, and take just decisions. While he exhorted the committee that squabbling over a piece of land was not in keeping with the spirit of religious life, he stood firm on the side of truth.

The Prophetic Chutzpah in Spirituality

Mar Jacob Mananathodath, the bishop of Palakkad, declared during the funeral ceremony of Fr. Dunston, "As we pray in the Communion Service of the Holy Eucharist, Fr. Dunston was a religious priest who lived with a 'cheerful face and pure heart'."

The inner strength of the personality of Fr. Dunston was anchored on the basic consciousness that "I totally belong to God and in Him alone I find my safety and comfort."

Fearlessness was natural to him. He possessed a heart that was quite genuine. Fr. Dunston was characterized by the perseverance to contend with the obstacles in the inner journey towards God, the tenacity to bear the pain caused by the hurdles, the inner strength to make any sacrifice, and the valour to duly respond to the untruths and injustice that causes the obstacles on the path to the divine. A mind that was beyond any suspicion, behaviour that was straightforward, actions that were consistent with his words, speaking to the point, a simple and unsophisticated life were the hallmarks of his character.

He always maintained within, a mind that was vigilant and critical of the incidents that took place in the congregation and the society. His opinions on these events were quite clear. He would often express his opinions and contentions in an emotionally charged manner. He clearly perceived the different facets of evil, and reacted appropriately.

Once he went for a meal to a house. A few priests accompanied him. As part of the sumptuous dinner, alcohol was also served as beverage. None of the priests took part in this social custom. The host started to press upon them to have some. 'What is the problem in taking some even though you are priests? Is that a grave sin? Isn't it only on occasions? It is not always... Isn't this quite normal in today's society?' The priests did not waver in spite of all such argumentations by the host. He conceded defeat and retreated. They continued to discuss several matters. Failures of the part of Church authorities and wrong deeds of priests were among the topics. Amidst these, the topic of alcoholism among priests also came up. The host's stance revealed that he had no respect for priests who consumed alcohol. He spoke very

abusively about priests who took alcohol. He had overlooked the fact that he was the one who spoke lightly about alcohol consumption among priests, and had even compelled the priests to consume it. On the way back from the house after dinner, the priests exclaimed among themselves, "It would have been a shame if we had consumed alcohol when he compelled us." This experience was a good lesson for all.

Once, Fr. Dunston happened to enter a celebration where the participants were consuming alcohol. He calmly began to serve himself food, without partaking in their drinks. A person offered Fr. Dunston a drink. Fr. Dunston refused. Soon, the request turned into a compulsion. Fr. Dunston exploded saying, "You may drink. I have not said anything against it. Why should you compel others?"

Fr. Dunston was a prophetic voice in the Provincial synaxes and the Congregational level meetings. He was unflinching in questioning even a small digression from upholding values and rendering justice. He was courageous in expressing his opinions openly. He did not mind the opposition. He fought, ignoring the injuries inflicted. He accepted the consequent loneliness. He had to face much inner struggles since he strived to maintain his commitment to truth in all aspects of life. He was branded 'stubborn' when he stood up for values with determination. It is only on rare instances that we come across such honest people. Their honesty might be ridiculed. Yet, they would not relent from what is right.

"Believe in truth; speak what you believe; act what you speak. Justice will prevail only by acknowledging truth." This was the conviction of Fr. Dunston. He considered that if the congregation committed a mistake, it was because of a

lack of commitment to the truth. He used to complain thus: “Words are inconsistent with actions! After choosing a life of obedience and humility, when not given a decorated office, you seem to be unsatisfied! You, who chose a life of poverty, are seen as pompous before men! Having vowed to obey and live a humble life, you go around desiring power! Setting aside the responsibilities you have taken up for the people, you seek other things!” Fr. Dunston believed that these tendencies are solely due to the lacunae in the allegiance to truth.

Humility and serenity were never lacking in his character even while he stood up for truth, without bothering about the one on the other side of the spectrum. There was no vengefulness, only loyalty to truth and perseverance for establishing justice. Innocence and a sense of justice came together in unison as a natural flow of his character. Even when he chided the individuals who go astray, he was able to maintain a sense of respect towards them. Hence, even those who opposed the ideas of Fr. Dunston honoured him wholeheartedly.

Imprinting Honesty in the Formees

As a person involved in formation for a very long time, Fr. Dunston clarifies his vision about formation.

“I had understood that this is a field where we could do a lot of good. My vision of formation was rather deep. I was deeply hurt that I could not do it in line with this vision. On deep reflection, I found that the formees had to imbibe a basic honesty. There is no meaning in religious life without it. It is this honesty that I wish to see nurtured in the candidates. Anything contrary to this desire caused me much sorrow. At times, I used to fall into despair.”

Fr. Dunston yearned that the aspirants and novices grew in honesty and with a sense of justice. He used to repeat that justice could prevail only by acknowledging truth. He lived an exemplary life of honesty in his words and deeds. He inspired the candidates to be always honest. He tried to pass on to others the dedication to truth exhibited in St. Thomas More, his idol. During his exhortations to the aspirants, St. Thomas More would invariably come up in a very contextual manner. When he was the Procurator and Confessor of the novices at Ambazhakkad monastery in 1953-1956, the novices staged the life of Thomas More egged on by Fr. Dunston. He urged the aspirants to translate the letters by the saint when he was at Ranchi.

The candidates enjoyed a freedom to confide anything in Fr. Dunston, their Rector. They were free to argue or even fight with him. He never ignored anything that emerged from an open and sincere heart. He was prepared to forgive the mistakes of aspirants when they were open with him.

The aspirants did not have to worry that Fr. Dunston might 'send them off' if they confided in him, their weaknesses. An aspirant openly admitted to him that he was there only to complete his pre-degree course. He permitted him to stay in the formation house and complete the course respecting his openness and honesty.

One person recounts his experience when he was in the aspirant house at Varandarappilly. "There was a shelf near the door as we enter the study hall from the corridor. The implements used for gardening were placed there. If we keep the door open it would cover the contents of the shelf. One day I took some things from the shelf. I left the other things in a haphazard manner. Fr. Dunston called up the

community after some time. Since what was repeatedly instructed was not followed, his face was grave. He enquired who had committed the mistake. A serious punishment was in store, for sure. I admitted that I had committed the mistake. To my surprise, he did not get angry. He just told me calmly to rearrange everything.”

Here is an incident from Ranchi when Fr. Dunston was Aspirant Rector: The plot next to the formation house was an orchard with plenty of jackfruit, mango, guava and leach trees. The owner of the garden and the gardener were away; the situation was quite favourable. Once the aspirants gathered some guavas and tried to pass it on to a nearby seminary. Fr. Rector came to know about it. With great love he corrected them reminding them that it was unjust. Yet, he was also a good father, who had concern for his children. He called up the gardener and worked out a deal to get fruits from each of the types.

Fr. Dunston was quite good at keeping secrets. He preserved them with much care. He did not divulge even to the provincials any of the secrets confided in him, by the aspirants. In case, he felt it necessary for them to be revealed, he would seek the permission of the candidate before doing so.

He was very sincere and honest in discerning the vocation of the candidates. He did not waver from his strong decisions, or fear the backlash from the community or the authorities. He did not fear to send home the candidates whom he thought did not have a calling fearing criticism from the community. In 1995, there was only one candidate remaining, to enter novitiate after the Plus Two studies at Little Flower

Minor Seminary at Kaundampalayam. He guided the remaining one person and sent him home too.

For several members of the Devamatha, Preshitha and St. Paul's provinces of CMI Congregation, Fr. Dunston was a major influence in their growth in religious values. He had recognized that the openness of the candidate towards the authorities is an important facet of honesty and is essential in formation. Hence, he exhorted them to approach their authorities with total openness. He considered it as his special duty to bring the aspirants closer to their formators if found at loggerheads. Fr. Benjamin Kottooran, a long-serving spiritual director at Dharmaram College, vouches that such efforts of Fr. Dunston bore much fruit: "Fr. Dunston had influenced deeply the scholastics coming from Thrissur. He has succeeded in cultivating openness in them."

Chapter 6

PRAYER: THE INCESSANT UNDERCURRENT OF LIFE

Fr. Dunston begins his autobiographical sketch by discussing the role of his parents in the formation of his character and in the growth of his spiritual life. He bears witness to the fact that his parents, especially his father, had a major influence in his spiritual growth. Fr. Dunston reminisces the journey of Ittooppunni in his quest to seek unity with God.

Son in the Father's Path

“As early as I can remember, we enjoyed a spiritual ambience in my family. I was born on 28 November 1920. Before that, on 4 July 1919 to be precise, our family was consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This consecration was zealously renewed every First Friday. If dad happened to be home on that day, he would invariably lead the prayer of consecration. His expression during this prayer is in itself a sight that would inspire spiritual enhancement in us. He used to recite the prayer with a lot of emotion. Before setting out on a journey, which would take unusually long time or which was conceived to be dangerous, all family members would renew the consecration together.

“On returning from journeys, dad would not forget to express his gratitude. He has reminded us more than once to do so. Once, when the entire family returned from a journey, I went to give thanks to the Sacred Heart all by myself. After some time, dad enquired of us all ‘Did anyone remember to

offer thanks?' I happily responded positively. That was one of the important lessons I learnt from dad.

"My parents had attempted to have consecration of the family in other families too. I have heard them motivating our guests by telling them of the blessings obtainable from the Sacred Heart by receiving the Blessed Sacrament on nine consecutive First Fridays. Later, however, the usual ritual of praying thrice a day, met with some obstacles at our home. Even the evening prayer began to be conducted in an unsatisfactory manner. However, until the demise of our parents, all family members were zealous with the prayer of Consecration of the family. Everyone who was able, would go to church on First Fridays and receive the Blessed Sacrament."

Though both his parents had given utmost care to create a spiritual environment in the family, Ittooppunni understood that it was his dad who influenced him more in his spiritual growth. He explains the reasons:

"From the earliest day I can remember, I was a person given to pondering. More than my heart, I was led by my brain. At around five or six years of age, I would get up from my mother's bed and run to dad's when I woke up seeing some horrible dreams. As I get hold of his hairy and stout hands, I could sleep peacefully. The reason could be that my father was strong while mother was not. Similarly, I had an understanding that father was more knowledgeable than mother. Hence, it was to my father that I was drawn more to."

Ittooppunni understood that he was like his father in many ways. And he was happy about it. Fr. Dunston points out to those instances when his dad influenced his prayer life:

“We lived in dire poverty through my early childhood. Sometimes, days would go by, only because of God’s Providence. Food would be provided very late on some days. On rare occasions, we also had to be satisfied with a bare minimum. It was only due to mom’s efficiency as a homemaker, that we survived those days. We did our best not to reveal this state of affairs to anyone. Besides this, our creditors were constantly pestering us for their money, often threatening us. It gradually turned into legal battles, judgment lien, warrant for arrest and so on. My dad had to abscond one night to avoid arrest. Many a time, the situation was such that dad could not stay at home during the day. Thus, my family was going through all sorts of trouble.

“When the harrowing period was almost over, dad said one day, “I have prayed and continue to pray for many things. However, I have not prayed for to remove his aforesaid troubles and to get to a better financial situation. We used to offer the Novena to the Sacred Heart for dad’s intentions. They might have been for other needs.

“I was surprised on hearing those words from dad. I was like him in this case. I used to pray for many intentions after my Communion. I had never prayed for the material uplift of my family despite being aware of the problems and being sad due to the pathetic situation of my parents. I did not wish to pray. I had surrendered the whole thing to God’s Will. Yet I did pray that the debts be paid off before my dad passed away in order that he did not have to suffer in the purgatory because of the unfulfilled outstanding moral debts caused by them. I was prepared to bear all sorrows and insults hurled at our family, due to indigence. I did not try to just wish them away.

“As we were familiar with the biography of the Little Flower, mom used to oblige us to emulate the saint in reciting the prayer of offering to the Immaculate Mary. I have heard her reciting it regularly. I recited them as a result of her insistence and as part of obedience. In those days, I was not too eager to recite the prayers from books. But, one day, I happened to hear the personal prayers of dad. I heard him reciting the prayer of offering to the Immaculate Mary without using the prayer book. From this I inferred that he had been reciting this prayer for years. Since then, it was easy for me to recite the prayer as mother had instructed. If I had recited the Immaculate Mary’s prayer as I was directed, the misfortunes I had to face later would not have happened.

“I had the habit of repeating the prayers before and after Communion as learnt from a book. One day I did not receive Communion as I could not complete the prayer in time. Later I received Communion only after a very long time. Dad observed this. On reaching home, he told me that I could recite the prayers in the book when time permitted. I enjoyed much freedom in this regard henceforward.

“My behaviour in the church was not always satisfactory. Instead of saying my prayers, I used to talk to other kids or be distracted both before and after my First Holy Communion. Both my father and mother had punished me for the same. Listening to my father trying to take in his phlegm was quite fearsome to me. I could distinguish that noise. If I heard that sound, I would be alert. This bad habit remained with me for quite some time. I prayed to God for the grace to avoid punishment for this habit. On most occasions God heard my prayer. I had miraculously escaped on many days where I deserved to be punished.”

The Path Lit by Mother

“My mother had motivated me and, at times, compelled me, to take up a few devotional practices. From among them I followed only these without fail – daily participation in Holy Mass, reception of Communion on Saturdays and on special feasts, and reciting three Hail Marys before and after sleep.

“It was not a practice in my village, for the priest to bring Communion to houses. So, mom, who suffered from many ailments, had to be taken on a stretcher to the church for Communion. A stretcher was brought from an uncle’s house, repaired and kept at our home for many years. Even during those years of famine, it would cost about one rupee to go to the church. And, as a result of our financial situation at that time, it was too much. But, I have seen her encouraging others by telling them that, on receiving Communion, there was much relief from pain and suffering. Even in the midst of so many troubles, dad was always prepared to fulfil this desire of mom. She would encourage us to receive Holy Communion on Saturdays and on the days of solemn feasts.

“Mother used to frequently tell us with much regret about the gradual decrease in piety in our family. It had a fearful effect on me when Her warning that the Sacred Heart of Jesus would spew out those who lacked in zeal struck me. A redemptive fear took wing in me. I used to frequently remember it later in life.

“My mother worked to popularize the league of prayer apostolate (*japaappasthola sakhya*). Not only did she enrol us as its members, she also advised others to do the same. It was through me that she sent to the monastery the pieces of paper on which the names of those thus added were noted. I was

the one who brought back to her the certificate of the members from the reverend priest.”

Son in the Path Oblivious to His Mother

My mother continued to compel me to learn to assist at the altar from the age of 6 up until I was 14. However, I could not.

“I could not progress as per my mother’s wish because I was not able to recite the prayers due to forgetfulness and also because I was not too keen for such pious practices. She used to complain that I grew worse with age. I was quite convinced of this fact.

“We had a habit of spending some time in personal prayer after praying the evening Angelus together. The family Rosary and other prayers were recited a little later. The instructions for the personal prayers were also given by my mother. She would enlist the minimum prayers to be recited then. The timing and number of prayers were added according to each one’s piety. Thus, my elder brother and sisters used to recite many prayers. The prayers were quite varied too. I used to take the same length of time to pray, as they did. But, my prayers were often recited in a low volume. Mother could only hear a buzzing noise. She used to scold me for it. I used to bear the scolding. On most days, the low volume was due to the fact that I was distracted. However, as the distractions were about good things, even though my vocal prayer was not proper, they transformed into excellent mental prayer.

“Even though I would decide to say only a few prayers, I would not be able to complete them by the time the others finished their prayers. I would also get up and move with

them, though. I used to feel guilty that I could not complete my list of prayers. But, I used to take some pretty important decisions regarding my future during those times. Then, repentance over my sins, and a desire to replace them with virtues, a disbelief in my own strength and faith in God were all taking shape within. However, I was troubled that my wishes would remain just wishes, and nothing more. One day, when I was 'buzzing', I was thinking about my entry into the congregation. When I felt that this strong desire was quite difficult to be realized, I became so physically weak that I was forced to sit. As mother could not understand the happenings in my mind, she was quite distressed about it, and concerned about me. I could not change my style of prayer too. Even today, my prayers continue to be conducted in this manner.

"I could never satisfy my mother about my pious life until I left home. However, as the time for my departure came close, she, because of her sorrow of separation and overflowing love, overlooked all my faults and started treating me as if I were the most well-behaved member of the family."

Even though the son could not shape up the way the mother would have wanted him to, God was, oblivious to him then, guiding him to a higher realm of mental prayer. He was aided in this regard by the situation that prevailed in the family, the spiritual ambience at home, the formation given by his parents and the special grace of God. A positive start was thus being made for a close union with God that remained closely intertwined with the long life of Fr. Dunston until his last breath.

Ittooppunni's Thanksgiving after Communion

Daily Mass and Communion were very precious for Ittooppunni. The moments of thanksgiving after the Holy Mass were invaluable moments for him. These moments contributed to his strength in times of distress to face adversity with divine hope. Fr. Dunston elucidates how much those holy moments mattered to him and how it aided his spiritual growth.

"I used to spend ten to fifteen minutes of the thanksgiving to repeatedly recite my small prayers. I would centre all my attention on my God, who is within."

Ittooppunni did not pray for the material progress of his family. He prayed, instead, that his father would not suffer in Purgatory, as a result of his unfulfilled outstanding moral debts (*utharippukadam*). My only prayer was "Let all my father's debts be repaid before my he died."

During Ittooppunni's thanksgiving prayer, his mother's anxieties about his prayer life would also come up. "I did not progress in piety according to mother's expectations. I did also not start to become a saint as I wanted. These were reasons for my sadness for long. I was constantly mournful as none of my desires were anywhere near realization. Yet, I would enjoy much consolation on the days I received Holy Communion. I used to receive Communion on Saturdays and when there was a solemn sung Mass in the monastery. On those days, I would repeat my desires to my Lord. I would happily return from the church with renewed hope.

"My chief prayer on receiving the Holy Communion was to make me a saint and to die before my mother's death so that her concerns about my prayer life be obliterated. In

addition, I also prayed that she be given the good fortune to see me both assisting at and offering Holy Mass."

The moment he realized that religious life is a means to holiness, Ittooppunni started praying that his siblings and friends be also attracted to religious life.

Ittooppunni was singularly focussed in life to become a saint and so, he prayed that any, and all hurdles on his path be removed. He prayed for the virtues that would lead him towards holiness. When he observed pride raising its ugly head in his endeavours to become a saint, he would pray in this manner: "Grant me humility." This used to be the first prayer for his Thanksgiving. He would repeat this prayer several times during the day. Later, when he found that he could not become a saint without forgiving his enemies, he started praying for the virtue of forgiveness. Interestingly, when he was around twelve years old, he was praying for four virtues: "Grant me the virtues of humility, forgiveness, perseverance and courage." Fr. Dunston says: "I did not get tired of repeating the same short prayer for a long time after Holy Mass. I did not neglect this practice even after being ordained a priest. It was a joy for me to do so just as I did as a child."

Dazzling Fireworks Not a Hindrance to Prayer

"I did not do anything for my parish (Pavaratty) after being ordained a priest. What could I do? I shall hear Confessions on the occasion of the parish feast." Fr. Dunston thought. He sought the permission from the vicar. He sat at the Confessional for the whole day. It was time for the night fireworks (part of the parish feast) to begin. After completing all the special prayers, people were all set to watch the scintillating fireworks. The security guard, during his patrols,

saw somebody sitting in the church. He informed the Vicar immediately. The church had to be locked. Fr. Vicar came over in search. Who was sitting inside the church at this time? They found Fr. Dunston praying the breviary. He explained that since he had been hearing Confessions all day long, he could not say his regular prayers.

He was very disciplined in spiritual matters. He was very careful not to avoid any obligatory prayers. The aspirants bear witness that he used to recite the breviary very late into the night when he was at Varandarappilly monastery. Many of them also witness that he used to spend a long time in prayer, on his knees in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, long after the aspirants went to bed.

Fr. Dunston once happened to stay overnight at Jyothi Ashram in Pattikkad, a house belonging to the MMB Congregation. He conversed with Bro. Savio for quite a long time. When it was ten pm, he told the Brother, "Now, you may retire to bed. I am not done with my spiritual reading today." Father followed his religious discipline even while travelling! Brother was quite surprised.

Remembering God Is My Duty

Remaining in constant remembrance of God was a part of life for Fr. Dunston. "Why do you always stand looking down?" This was the question that Maria, his brother's granddaughter asked Fr. Dunston. "Oh, you are asking why I am looking down? In fact, I am mentally drawing the image of the Holy Trinity on the ground. And then, I meditate looking at that image." He was explaining his method for seamless prayer. He continues: "Draw in your mind an image of God you like. You can look at that image and pray for

hours without distraction. On completion of this prayer, you will be able to copy that image onto a paper.”

Practising constant remembrance of God and spiritual reading were the spiritual practices that Fr. Dunston performed consistently. He motivated those who sought his spiritual guidance to imbibe these practices. He spoke about saints, especially St. Therese of Child Jesus, to the candidates.

An aspirant shares his experience: “Fr. Rector wouldn’t teach us any great theology. Once when I went to meet him personally, he asked me to prepare a day’s schedule and bring it to him. I still remember the advice he gave me when I went back to him with the carefully prepared schedule. ‘Whenever you start or end every item in your day’s schedule, remember God and seek His grace to spend that time well.’ Fr. Rector thus taught me to practice remembrance of God and to make it a part and parcel of my life.”

He did not forget to surrender to God’s Will even when he prayed hard. A novice once approached Fr. Dunston seeking his prayers for his sister who was diagnosed with cancer. Fr. Dunston took the novice to the statue of the Little Flower and said, “I shall surely pray. Do not be cross with Jesus even if something bad happens.” Even while assuring the brother of his prayer support, he was also preparing him to concede to God’s Will. Thus, the brother found solace in Fr. Dunston’s exhortation “Do not be cross with Jesus” while later mourning his sister’s demise.

Fr. Dunston is a mystic who led a joyous and pleasant life trusting in Divine Providence. He was quietly drawn to the Carmelite saints like St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and St. Therese of Child Jesus. Carmelite spirituality overflowed profusely in his prayer and simplicity.

Days and Nights in the Divine Presence

The personality of Ittooppunni is one that blossomed and flourished in the plenitude of divine spirit. The zealous relationship with God effected by the enduring religious commitment turned out to be its seamless undercurrent. Even when his memory was hazy and he was not able to connect the names with the persons he had known, this divine stream continued to steadily flow within.

During the times when he was hale and hearty, the sight of Fr Dunston, meditating on his knees with folded hands in the chapel was a sight to behold... truly inspirational! On some occasions he would fall asleep during prayer. Once a novice asked him, "Why do we see you sleeping in the chapel?" Fr. Dunston replied, "I am in the presence of God. He sees me. The important point is that I remain in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament." With that incident, the novice was inspired to be in front of the Blessed Sacrament with a remembrance of the Divine Presence.

In the last days of his life, as he rested on his bed, he would have a strong urge to rush to the chapel when he heard common prayers being started. If Fr. Dunston was found missing for prayers in the chapel, one of the novices would knock at his door. We could see him immediately running to the chapel. It showed an innocent determination to be in time for the common prayers. He was very fond of praying the Rosary. One day he was sleeping when it was time for Rosary. He came up to the chapel during Rosary and expressed his unhappiness to the novices for not waking him up.

Even when his memory was blurred, his consciousness of the importance of the Blessed Sacrament, Word of God and

the Holy Cross shone brightly in his mind. Pointing to the Tabernacle, he would exhort the novices saying, "That red one (cloth covering the tabernacle) is the most powerful."; pointing to the Bible, "That is second."; and finally, pointing to the Crucifix, "That is third." Whenever there was a power outage, he would immediately go to the chapel and light a lamp next to the tabernacle.

He joined the novices in community prayers, on his knees, despite suffering the difficulties posed by his ailments. He spent hours together meditating in front of the Blessed Sacrament on his knees with folded hands in the morning, daytime, midnight and when everyone else had retired for the day. He bent his knees and stretched his hands and prayed for long durations in the Presence of the Blessed Sacrament. He spent the whole of the holy hour on his knees for adoration. When his memory flashed on, he called out and prayed to Jesus and Mary. "Lord pardon me! Lord forgive me!" became the constant ejaculatory prayer for him. When he could not bear the physical pain, he would cry out "Jesus, save me! O Mother, help me!" He tried to guide others to have devotion to St. Chavara. He continued to chant the names of Jesus... Mary... Little Flower... St. Chavara... even during his last days.

He continued to cherish the values that had become a part of his soul by constant practice, though his memory increasingly grew weak.

In the Lord's Presence, Forgetful of Self

The novices used to remain in his room to assist Fr. Dunston, who was bearing the difficulties caused both by his ailments and his age. Occasionally, when they happened to wake up in the middle of the night, they would see Fr. Dunston

kneeling at the altar and praying, "Lord, save me! Lord, save me!"

With the passage of time, Fr. Dunston lost his memory, scarcely remembering anyone, and that too, only faintly. Even at that time, he could discern the difference between the Tabernacle and the Cross. He would enter the chapel and slowly walk around looking at the statues and images of saints. When he perceived the Cross in the *Madbaha*, he would forget himself, raise his hands towards it and sing aloud, charged with emotion. The song would come out as a rumbling from the throat. Normally, one wouldn't see any emotions expressed while he prayed. However, even as he moved to the last leg of his life, with his memory and intellect slowly deteriorating, his ardent love towards his Beloved Lord flowed out without any barriers or blockages.

He had practised to call upon Jesus ceaselessly from his early days. He continued it throughout his life. Even when he forgot everything else, he did not forget Jesus. "I am dying... Jesus... help me... save me... I am happy... I am going... Jesus." Those were the last words of Fr. Dunston! He lived with his eyes focussed on heaven. He loved Jesus deeply throughout his life and finally became one with Him. He completed his journey to holiness chanting the name of Jesus.

Prayer of Fr. Dunston

O my Jesus, I do wish to love You more and more. Let me love You with all my heart and soul, and all my mind and strength. I entrust you to fill my heart with Your holiness and make of it a beautiful home for You - a living Tabernacle, where You will ever dwell, so that You will live Your own life in me. Dearest Jesus, let me live only on Your behalf and in

Your name; to perceive all forms from your point of view till
my life be one with You. Never let me leave You alone.

Chapter 7

THE VIRTUOUS PATH OF COMPLIANCE

Fr. Dunston regarded religious obedience to be precious. We could often hear him saying, "When Fr. Prior told me so, I gave in." His spirit of obedience welling up in his innate nature would, without an effort, overflow in such phrases such as: "*vazhippedal*," (give in) "as Fr. Superior says," "after consulting Fr. Superior," "If Fr. Superior says so," and took concrete shape in action.

Obedience Is a Holy Sacrifice

Ithooppunni had a talent. He could sketch and paint very well, and enjoyed painting a lot. He used to visualize images that emerge from the walls of the of the chapel in Ambazhakkad monastery; even the little cracks and the shapes that come out of the peeled off painting of the walls inspired him to imagine and create new forms and shapes. During such instances, he longed to withdraw to his room and give colour to his newly absorbed images and shapes. On some occasions, the novice did draw some. Once he shared his curious fantasies with his Rector. Fr. Rector, instead of being pleased with Ithooppunni's talent, was infuriated on hearing the story. He commanded the novice to give up drawing and painting for ever. The disciple never failed to keep that commandment till his death. In the period 1980-82, the sixty-year-old Fr. Dunston shared this experience to one of his novices admitting that it pained him much not to paint. Yet, he accepted the painful experience as the Holy Will of God. Such was the significance he gave to obedience.

Though he eschewed the desire to pursue the art of drawing because he believed in obedience, he nevertheless, saved it in his heart without frittering it away, and in the privacy of his prayer life this talent blossomed. His notes indicate that he sketched images in his imagination and made them an experience in spirituality. Moreover, he took great care in nurturing the artistic talents of the aspirants. He revealed to them the art of drawing flowers with ease. He also taught them origami.

A Childlike Obedience

His demeanour was quite simple. He would doze off when he sat alone for prayer in the chapel. When someone woke him up, he would like a child, awaken, and accompany the one who woke him up.

The religious superiors of Fr. Dunston were, on most occasions, younger to him. Yet, he submitted to them without any difficulty. He would seek permission from the superior before he travelled anywhere. On his return, he would meet the superior in person to inform him of his arrival. Such innocent obedience was an inspiration for others.

One day, he wore a white cassock and reached the Vimal Jothi Convent at Saravanampatti. One of the sisters exclaimed with wonder, "What a surprise! We haven't seen you without your brown habit!" With a hearty smile, he responded, "When Fr. Provincial insisted, I just conceded."

The sacerdotal golden jubilee of Fr. Dunston was celebrated at the Novitiate House in Saravanampatti. A sister from Vimal Jothi Convent gave him a gift. She asked him for a memento of his golden jubilee, "Haven't you got several woollen shawls? Give me one." The sisters gathered there

supported her saying, "Father, this sister feels very cold. Give her one." Without giving any room for doubt, he replied, "I have a superior here. I shall do just as he says."

Obedience Shining in Openness

"We don't lose anything by obeying our superiors. But, if you feel that something is not correct in the matter you are asked to obey, you should pray well and humbly express your reservations to the concerned superior openly. Not expressing your opinion is a mistake. Obedience out of fear will demote your honesty." This is his perspective about obedience.

When Fr. Dunston was receiving formation in the Congregation, there was no opportunity for candidates to study the PDC course. It was reserved for the chosen ones. Bro. Dunston desired to study. He sought permission but was denied.

He became sick the year before his ordination. Due to the dosage of the medicine that he was taking, he often felt hungry. He spent many days with much difficulty. One day he told the authorities, "I constantly feel hungry. Please grant me permission to take something in between meals." The person in charge looked at him with surprise. A religious is seeking permission to take food in between meals!

When he remembers the aforementioned incidents, he would add, "We should obey our superiors. Our obedience to leaders in religious life should be like that of children to their parents. We can tell all our wishes to our superiors. We are children; children have every right and freedom to ask for their wishes."

He was appointed as formator for aspirants in 1956. He was progressing sincerely with his formation, when, one day, his confreres found a grave fault in the formator. They complained to Fr Rector about it. Fr. Rector discussed the matter with the formees. He sought their opinion about the action to be implemented. Years before the II Vatican Council, when there was not even a word discussed about dialogue, it was considered inappropriate for the Rector to seek the opinion of the candidates.

A religious should be honest. Openness to the authorities is an essential part of honesty. He wished to see these in everyone. He used to suggest that there should be a filial relationship between the authorities and their subjects. He tried to establish such a relationship with his superiors. He wished to choose his Superior as his Confessor and Spiritual Director.

On the occasion of his Sacerdotal Golden Jubilee, he was asked, "As a person involved in formation for a very long time, what is the main difference between the methods of formation in your youth and today?"

He answered the question thus: "Candidates, then, used to approach their nearest formator or Superior for spiritual direction. But, today, we see them seeking spiritual directors outside, neglecting their formators. Thus, of late, we have seriously lost sight of a religious value which ought to have been nurtured in our Congregation." He laments, "If we had maintained such a spiritual relationship between the formator and the formee, we would have had a religious community that enjoyed freedom and mutual openness."

Occasionally, there used to be a few issues that caused discontent among the novices. Fr. Dunston, their Rector,

called for a meeting to discuss and iron out the differences. After a long dialogue, Fr. Dunston spoke to them about the '*nyaayam peshal*' meeting that was in vogue among the tribals in Attappady. The tribals come together and discuss their issues and differences of opinion. When they conclude the meeting, tribal head will say, "What has happened has happened. This must not be repeated again." He questioned them on the need for dialogue in religious life. He asked them, "If the tribal societies practised this system, why didn't the so-called modern civilization do so? He always tried to reunite the broken links of relationships among the candidates.

He maintained a passion to be obedient to the laws of both the Catholic Church and the Congregation he belonged to. He took care and much consideration to take decisions based on these laws. He was faithful in observing the laws - small or big. They celebrated the heavenly patron's day of an aspirant during the Lent season at Varandarappilly. Fr. Dunston had just placed a piece of candy in his mouth when he remembered that it was a day of fasting. Immediately he ran out and spat it out.

It was when Fr. Dunston was the Prior that the college at Varandarappilly was inaugurated. Fr. Principal wished to make the inaugural function grand. Fr. Dunston, the manager, said with a calm demeanour, "We are already struggling to get sufficient funds for the college. In this context, do we need such ostentation for its inauguration? I think we should avoid it." Fr. Principal retorted quite characteristically to it: "Then, here is the key. I am not going to be the Principal." Quite indignant at the response, Fr. Dunston admonished him saying, "Is this religious life? Is this the way to speak? Is this how you behave?" With this

censuring, Fr. Principal came around; he cooled down. The inauguration of the college ended up being a simple affair.

Fr. Dunston was particular in following not only the laws of religious life but those at all realms. He respected the need to give sufficient opportunities to others. When he went to Vimal Jothi Hospital, Sisters would give him preferential treatment when there were many patients waiting for their turn. He did not particularly like this special treatment.

It was a common sight at the Novitiate house in Saravanampatti to have peacocks moving about in the campus. Once the novices tried to scare them off. When they tried to get hold of one of them, Fr. Dunston told them off. "We are people who take the vow of Obedience. We should be first to obey the government directives and set an example to others."

Once Fr. Dunston was waiting in a long queue at Palakkad Bus Stand to travel to Coimbatore. Feeling a sense of sympathy for the priest standing in a long queue, an official made arrangements for him and a few others to sit in a bus stationed in the garage. Father felt quite uncomfortable sitting in the bus. He felt it was an injustice for him to sit and travel comfortably while several others were painstakingly waiting for their turn. While all others were sitting very cosily, Fr. Dunston alone moved out. He did not wait in the queue and waste time. He got into a local bus and then changed buses in between and reached Coimbatore with much difficulty.

Hazy Memory, yet Obedient

He used to say that obedience was priceless, and that our older generation had provided great examples of obedience

and that even when they grew old, and their memory dimmed, they recognised their authorities and obeyed them.

He never abandoned the virtue of submission to superiors even when his memory was gradually diminishing in its vitality. He was in au fait with his superiors though he was becoming increasingly senescent. He obeyed them to the T. He always showed deference to them. Once he knelt down before Fr. Davis Thattil, his Superior, kissed his hand and beseeched him saying, "Kindly forgive me." However, Fr. Davis was puzzled about the reason behind Fr. Dunston seeking forgiveness.

During the later years of his life, as his memory began to play truant, Fr. Dunston, after the morning prayers, would take the spade and move towards the garden, when one of the novices would try to stop him. He would then be very cross at them. However, if he was informed that the Rector had prohibited it, he would immediately submit. He would respect anyone's words if he was informed it came from the Superior. He treasured the virtue of giving in even when his memory was diminishing.

Chapter 8

PLACED RELATIONSHIPS AT A SANCTIFIED MILIEU

In his autobiographical notes, Fr. Dunston testifies to the significance of his parents: “I am not writing as a son who writes the biography of his parents. My deep affection for them has not been brought out here. I have written it as a third person writes it.”

What was the reason for his indifferent approach to relationships with other members of his family, as a result of which he ripped off the warmth of familial bonds from the heart? He responds in his own words.

“Ever since I turned seven, my thoughts were of the spiritual realm. It seemed to have subjugated my natural love for people and things around me. I seemed to be eager to disengage myself from everything I loved and enter monastic life. I feared that familial bonds might impede this aspiration. So, I behaved like a stranger with my family.

“Mom loved us very deeply. You wouldn’t see any mother in that vicinity who loved her children as much as my mother did. I prevailed over the extraordinary love of my mother. As I had decided to enter monastic life from childhood, I purposely kept away from mom. I feared that the love of my mother would weaken my resolve to lead a monastic life. I was aware of this weakness. As a result, I consciously reined in the feelings of my heart. Existing in this manner, living such a stoic life, I was able to narrowly avoid my mother’s love. It was not just my mother; the policy was the same with everyone I loved. My fear that I may not be able to prevail

over my love for others caused me to constantly control my heart.”

Ittooppunni had pledged that his family relationships would not be a hindrance to his entrance into religious life. The thoughts that passed through his mind at the age of seven when his mother was moving towards her last moments on earth, were those of a person who has totally renounced this world. “Ever since I could remember, my mother was mostly bedridden. She was taken ill by one or the other very painful ailments. She was even administered the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, a few times.

“As my mother lay in bed counting her days, my house was full of people. All of them were crying and praying. The sound of my mother’s last gasp and the prayers recited as a person is dying, echoed in my ears. My elder sister, brother and myself knelt at her feet and were silently praying with folded hands. Tears flowed profusely from the eyes of my brother. My younger sister sat down, stretched out her hands towards mom and was crying loudly. She was inconsolable. However, my prayer was different from theirs, and peculiar. I incessantly kept chanting, ‘Lord, please make my mother die today itself.’ It was not because I was oblivious to how the situation at home would be after mother’s demise that I prayed so. I did understand the gist of the sympathetic words that people expressed towards us children. We had heard several stories of children without mothers. I prayed thus since I felt this was the most opportune time for my mother to die. She had received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick in one of those days. She lay with the proper preparations having been made for her final journey. She was made to kiss the Crucifix quite often. The image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which was the one to which our family

frequently made the Prayer of Consecration, was placed near her. Sometimes she was made to kiss that image too. The prayer for the dying was recited in unison. All these made me think that this was the most appropriate time for my mother to die. The only thought foremost in my mind at that time was the spiritual good of my mom. My thought process generally proceeded in this manner, something I acquired by practice.”¹

Fr. Dunston continues:

“Before I was fifteen, as I was about to leave home to enter the Aspirants’ House, as was the practice, our family gathered to recite the prayer of Consecration to the Sacred Heart. The prayer was not recited because of my insistence. Just like others, I also wished to recite the prayer. However, like an expert psychologist, I was against doing so. I thought that the prayer would evoke our sensitive emotions and that my weaknesses would be foregrounded. That would make me cry like them. So, in a way, I was just escaping from home after a silent prayer in front of the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

My leaving home was quite different from the way children normally leave their homes. When I left home, I had deeply thought about my future and was cognizant of the possible difficulties. As I stepped past the main door of the house, I deemed it my last journey. From now on, I belonged fully to my Superiors. I would go wherever they sent me. I

¹ Fr. Dunston, here, is recounting the incident that occurred in 1927. His mother came out of her illness and lived on. His mother testified that a ray of light emerged from the image of the Sacred Heart towards her and she was healed. Her demise was in 1950.

was even prepared never to return home. In my mind, I was dead with regards to my family.”

Having bid adieu to his home as a person dead to the world, Ittooppunni delighted in the realisation that he now belonged totally to God. His profession of vows and priestly ordination took place in course of time in the Congregation. The spirit of surrender continued to flourish in him beyond all limits. He was very particular in making sure that his inner core remained unaffected on learning about the problems in his family. He offered the relationships and the consequent problems to God in prayer.

Familial Bonds Imbued in Spirituality

Fr. Dunston rarely visited his family members. After the demise of his elder brother in 1982, he had to involve himself for some time in a few issues at home. He had to deal with his widowed sister-in-law and kids, as well as his younger sister, Kochuthresia, a spinster. Yet, he was careful not to allow himself to be involved too much in the issues of his family. He maintained a respectable distance from the members of his family. However, he passionately prayed for the resolution of all family issues.

Once, he replied to a letter sent to him by his nephew, Stany: “There is no need for me to involve myself in this matter. Mentally, I am not built to do anything in such issues. I am a person who thirsted to be free of such relationships from a very early time. I took interest in it only because I was forced to do so by others.”

He was constantly conscious of his state of life even when he was drawn into family matters forced by situations. Fr. Dunston was an ardent spiritual seeker who, by detached

living, kept aloof from family bonds and achieved inner freedom through intense practice of self-discipline.

Even when he did intervene in the issues at home, he lifted them to a spiritual realm. He was focussed above all on the spiritual growth of his family members and on the formation of their character. Excerpts from the letters he wrote to his elder brother's children testify to this fact.

8-11-79

Dear Justin,

I am happy to note that you are trying to attend Holy Mass and concentrate on your studies. The lethargy in waking up in the morning is not good. You had written to me that you would overcome it soon. I believe that you are doing everything punctually. In the total of 15 days, you attended Holy Mass only for five days. There is no difficulty in going for Mass after your exams, is there? I imagine you are indeed going. I had told you to study for an hour after coming back from church. If you study from quarter to seven till eight, it makes one hour and fifteen minutes. That is not against my instructions. It is your responsibility to study for more time if needed. You have to find the necessary time by yourself.

I shall not compel you to attend Mass daily. Do it only if you are convinced by now that it is good for you and not an obstacle for your studies. Don't go because I told you to do so. It is good to take part in daily Mass to seek God's grace for your future, to please God and to pray for yourself and for your family. Isn't it proper for those who are able among us to participate in Mass wherein Jesus sacrifices Himself for us? You wouldn't be a good person if you do not conquer your sluggishness. God wants us to utilize all the talents He

has given us and work hard. God loves and will crown those who fulfil His Holy Will.

It is not sufficient to read only to pass the exam. You should read good books to gain the necessary knowledge to live a good Catholic life.

22-6-1985

Dear Justin,

We spoke before your tenth-grade exams. Are you going to the church on weekdays? Is it possible for you? How close are you to God? Do you fear Him more than you love Him? Do you remember Him at all? Is it only an occasional remembrance? Or do you constantly remember Him?

Do you wish to hark back to God more frequently and love Him more dearly?

What can you do to be more pleasing to God? Ponder prayerfully as to what God specifically asks of you. Do you converse with God? Are you afraid of talking to Him? Or, are you interested in having a conversation? Does it come easily to you? Can I help you? How can I help you in this regard?

Read this letter four times a month and every time you do so, prayerfully answer before God. Write down your answers each time. If you like it, after the fourth assessment with date, write to me.

22-12-1996

Dear Justin,

Just like you pray for me, do pray for the families of your brothers and sisters. That will help your prayers be heard by God.

Pray for your mother and aunt that they get the strength to accept with fortitude, the physical and mental sufferings

caused by their age. Accept, for the sake of God, the sufferings others may cause you. That will augur well for you and for them.

When we help others, God will certainly bless us, if not materially, at least spiritually. Let God's Will be completely fulfilled in you... I am on my way to heaven.

Dear Stanislaus,

Try to learn day by day, to surrender everything to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and live without any worry. Read at least a part of the Gospel regularly. Read other good spiritual books too.

8-11-1985

Dear Stany,

... Got the letter with the information about Daisy's delivery. Thank you for everything. Glory to God! Tell her to receive the bundle of joy from God's hands and to be prepared in every way to nurture the God-given child according to God's Will, calmly trusting in God the Father, in everything, letting go of any apprehensions whatsoever. Whenever you see the baby, bear in mind that it is a special and very precious gift from God, the Lord of life. I hope that your baby remains a reason for you to commit God to your memory. I hope the baptism of the baby is over. It is certain that the innocent newborn is the perfect temple of God now. When you kiss the darling babe remember the indwelling God.

Dear Stainslaus,

... The circumstances are such that I cannot give you a positive response to your letter. So, let your housewarming go on well without me. May God abundantly bless you and

your family and your home! I heartily felicitate you for being the first member to move out of the joint family.

This will be a new experience for you. You should get a good image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, arrange it in a prominent place and make the consecration of your family. You need to prepare yourselves for the consecration. You could make the consecration along with the house blessing. Write and keep the date of consecration in a visible manner (inside the glass) on the image. You could also celebrate in a simple manner, the anniversary of the consecration.

I hope you will now get more time to pray. You now live in a small house, with a small family. You won't be too busy. You will be able to move closer to God. Accordingly, also try to move closer to people as God wishes. Learn from prayer to show generosity to God and human beings, and to behave according to God's Will.

We have no one else to trust other than God. Wealth, friends, physical strength and other such qualities are transitory. In whom shall we trust, if not in God, who is omnipotent, omniscient and loves us boundlessly? Who else can know of our needs other than God? Who can help us if not the Almighty God? God loves any sinner till the last death. Let us offer ourselves and all that are ours to this God. And, let us live with God with serenity and peace. Trust in God and let us give ourselves up to God's Will.

... This first attempt should be exemplarily simple for others. Cut down on your expenses... Consult with others before you act.

Varandarappilly
16-3-1959

Dear Kochuthresia,

Life in this world is a preparation for the heavenly life. How blessed are they who disengage their minds from worldly pleasures, and find bliss in God and the divine matters! We can find lasting peace and satisfaction only in our God our Father. God will not refuse to provide us with the strength to overcome any difficult situation, if we control and even sacrifice our desires for the sake of God. Believe and trust in God like a child. It is foolishness to put our trust in anything else. God alone remains constant.

Let your only desire in life be to become a saint. You can start even now. God is always eager to forgive our sins and lead us forward. We need to just repent for our wrongdoings and move closer to Him with good resolutions.

Here, we are all fine. It would be good if you could offer your sacrifices for my children here. If you would assist them through your prayer and sacrifices to become good priests, you will share in their good deeds.

Your dear brother,
Dunston of the Holy Family TOCD

Pakulam
23-12-1975

Dear Kochuthresia,

... It is great if you find peace in God. For God alone is unchanging and infinite. This God is our Father whose love for us knows no boundaries. Our Father will forgive us if we repent for whatever sin we may have committed. He will choose to overlook these sins when we repent. So, place all your faith and trust in God and continue to love. Believe that whatever happens is permitted by God for our good. Try to rid yourself of that which causes you pain; also pray that it be

removed. If some of it still remains, pray for divine assistance to endure them by surrendering to His Will.

Yours lovingly,
Own brother,
Dunston CMI

When Hearts Meet in Spirit

Fr. Dunston could relate to people at the spiritual realm even while being aloof from family bonds or natural human relationships. He explains: I entertained spiritual relationships. And, they grew very strong. I would have doubted whether I had a heart if I had not been involved in such relationships. That is how much I tried to overcome the pull of natural love and relationships. Such efforts brought in an altogether new habit in me." He engaged in unequivocal attempts to conquer natural relationships and give them a firm footing in spirituality. The love filled in his heart brimmed over in the lofty realm of divinity. Here we have a testimony from his memoirs:

"In the first week after joining the school, I was seated in the third row from the front, beside a child who belonged to the Nair caste. One day, when this boy tried to cheat me over a pencil, N. P. Devassy came to my rescue. Devassy became my friend from that day. Our class teacher, Mr. John, seeing that my seating may not be suitable, made me sit with Devassy. The benches in our class could seat only two persons. Except for a few days, we both sat in the same bench for the next six years.

"When we were in the first form, Devassy was bedridden as a result of some ailments. Then, I had to share my bench with other kids. Devassy had never expressed any wish to sit next to me. But, I was particular about it. However, when the

situation called for it, I happily sacrificed that wish. Our friendship did not come in the way of the rights or wishes of the other kids. They accepted this fact too. We needed assistance from others for us to be in the same bench. There would be a rearrangement of classrooms at least three or four times a year. After the shuffling, the seats chosen by each student was reserved for them. On such days, I would go very early and reserve the bench and desk for Devassy and me. Once books are placed in the shelves under the desk, no one else will claim that seat. Usually, we managed to get seated in the first row.

“I was going this extra mile to keep myself from committing any wrong-doing. I could not find many whom I can confidently claim would never utter ungodly words. The second reason was to maintain our mutual friendship.

“That he first came to my rescue and that Mr. John let him be my bench-mate, motivated me to choose Devassy as my friend. There is one more reason. Even though we were not acquainted with each other, I had seen him on several occasions. He attracted my attention on occasions in the monastery campus. I had understood by observation that he too was nurtured with great attention like me. I studied him while we were in the monastery parlour. I learnt that just as I had been sent from my house, he too had been. I had closely observed his behaviour in church. I never knew his whereabouts till we became friends. We had the opportunity to meet either at school or at church. From there we went on our separate ways: he to the south and me to the north.

“I had several friends from the time I can remember. I knew that they loved me very much. Yet Devassy was the only one I chose as my friend. And I am sure it was an

inspired choice. No worldly or natural reasons had a major influence in this choice. I endeavoured to rarefy this love on a daily basis. From that day on, I ventured to learn the qualities and examples of model friends. Trusting in God, I vowed not to cause any slack to this relationship. I clearly remember that I pledged to continue to love Devassy in God even if he went away from me. The logic behind the decision was that I should not shun the person whom God had handed to me. I have not wavered from, or diminished in that love until this moment. There was no obstacle from his part to this friendship even for a moment until I entered the Aspirants House. I had seen many children of our age being friends. However, I have not seen any of them not indulging in quarrels at least once.

“Both of us were reluctant or unable to express love publicly. Generally, our mode of expression was to be together or to play together. Strangely, our friendly chats were made in silence. During the last few days there, like everyone else, we used to play ball during the five-minute recess.

“When we reached fifth form we were in different sections. I was preparing to enter Aspirants’ House in those days. Although I had secured the permission to enter, I was at home and doing my studies thanks to the compulsion from my mom. Thus, we were in different classrooms. I had to be seated close to the aspirants.

“We had an opportunity for friendly conversations only in the church premises. We would come together to talk. However, we could not talk. I would have a lot to speak. But, I would be tongue-tied in his presence. We would just stand with our eyes fixed at a distance. We would look at each

other's face and smile intermittently. This was our great expression of mutual love. We would remain thus till it was time for church services. My heart was filled with love. But, my proud self would not allow me to express it. Hence, it became a big suffering for me. It was only in my Lord's Presence that I could get some consolation for it. I would gain satisfaction by praying for him. I used to pray to God that He be called to religious and holy life, which I deemed very lofty. I was not capable of expressing love better.

Before my First Holy Communion, some in the vicinity of my house gave me a nickname: 'grandpa' (*thanthappidi*). By a strange coincidence, Fr. Panikulam Thomas, then Vicar, called Devassy by the same nickname. Hence, there is no reason to be surprised that in the friendship between the young 'grandfathers,' there were no necessity for outward expressions.

"Devassy had, on occasions, saved me with his physical might, from people who were in some way bothering me, albeit without ill intentions. I was seen in school as a calm and loving person. I was capable of much endurance. But, Devassy wasn't. Occasionally, he would express his anger. Once, the anger had been directed at me, too. But, I took it as a mark of his great love; and it was so too. When I was in the fourth form, a general physical weakness took hold of me. I felt my memory failing me. I had not experienced so much difficulty in studies till then. But now, I felt it was impossible for me to continue my studies looking at the condition of my body. I was in serious pain. As I could not reveal what the sickness was, I did not tell anyone. Our exams were approaching. The other students were revising their lessons in the classroom. Since the syllabus for that year was new, class notes were the only hope. I did not have the full copy of

the notes with me. I had to depend on others' notes and so I had to be in the class. Given this situation, Devassy could not control his anger seeing me idling my time in school. While he was studying hard at home at night as well as at school, he reckoned I was wasting my time in class despite this being the only available time for me to study. Seeing me preparing to fail in the ensuing exams was unimaginable for him and so, he pinched me once or twice in mock anger. Our love was not expressed through emotions; it was more intellectual.

“One morning, as I was leaving to school, a few blisters appeared on my hands. As usual, I sat with Devassy, jostling with him on the same bench. I told him about the blisters, and asked him to be careful. But he moved closer to me and, to give me more courage and reassurance, he also put his hands over my shoulders more often. I felt comforted. I would have gone home if teacher had permitted. When I returned after two weeks in home quarantine, I heard that Devassy was in bed with the same sickness. However, on his return to school, he did not show any sign of repentance for not being careful despite my warnings. Love does not know hurdles.

“I don't remember exchanging any things between us. I used to think at that time that I did not love anyone as I did Devassy. All other relationships were natural to me. But this one was quite spiritual. I didn't venture to do anything contrary to the instructions from my family, based on our friendship. I did not have any reason to go against God's Will in this relationship. I could see God's hand in it. I was always prepared to estrange myself from him, for God's sake. Nevertheless, I wished to see both of us together in religious life too.

“I had only one friend in this world. This statement could be misunderstood. I love my religious confreres more than

him. But they are my brothers; not friends. A friend is chosen; one of many. He was chosen as a friend because of the goodness in him. It was a free act without any compulsion from without. We are not expected to love our brothers in this way; we are law-bound to love them even if there is no good in them. Since there is more naturalness in the first instance, it might appear to be greater love."

Friendship and Religious Chastity

Fr. Dunston testifies that his parents raised all their children giving them protection in body and soul. The formation from home came to his aid in maintaining purity. He maintained a discipline – external and internal – throughout his life, which helped him in following religious chastity.

When he visited his family after profession of vows, he would spend the nights, not at home, but at the monastery in Pavaratty. In 1982, he reached home on the very day his brother passed away. The mortal remains were brought home very late into the night. By 11 pm, Fr. Dunston took Stany, his nephew, to the second floor. He lay down there, and told him, "You are witness that I slept here tonight." He was taking help to keep away from a situation that could potentially lead to sin.

A novice once went to his room at night, as the bystander. When he tried to lock the door from inside before going to bed, Fr. Dunston told him, "It is not correct for us brothers to sleep in a room behind locked doors."

Even when his memory was fading in the far end of his life, his bodily movements and responses to others were proof that his consciousness on purity has taken deep roots in him.

Chapter 9

POVERTY, A BLESSING OF FULFILMENT

The family of Ittooppunni experienced dire poverty in childhood. His childhood was not free of cares, as childhood should be. Obviously, such a person would seek a life of fulfilment. He agonised about the poverty in the family. Nevertheless, he never desired material uplift of his family; neither did he pray for this. He just left it to the Will of God. He was prepared to accept the suffering and insults meted out by society, that are part of poverty.

Ittooppunni responded quite creatively towards the challenge posed by poverty in the family. He did not fall prey either to inferiority complex or to a craze for earning money by hook or crook, as both could ruin his personality. The financial constraints at home filled him, on the contrary, with lofty attitudes. He realized poverty opening up in front of him the ladder to his dreams of attaining holiness. The family circumstances schooled him in imbibing the spirit of poverty.

The Divine Banquet without a Crown

Ittooppunni received his First Holy Communion when he was seven-and-a-half years old. His family members burnt midnight's oil to make his crown for the special day. Fr. Seraphin did not like it, though. He wanted a crown made of fresh flowers. As there was no time to make such a crown at that time, it was decided not to have any. So, there was no crown. Ittooppunni took it as a blessing for he was uncomfortable wearing it. He purposefully avoided anything special for himself.

Many years later, when Fr. Dunston was made to wear a golden crown on the occasion of the golden jubilee of his religious profession celebrated in the Provincial House at Coimbatore, one of the felicitators exclaimed, "I have never seen him with such embellishments."

Love of Poverty: A Special Grace

With his First Holy Communion, God granted Ittooppunni the grace to deeply love poverty. Fr. Dunston looks back to the profound insights into poverty at the age of seven and a half:

We were poorer than those who were living in our land because the place they lived belonged to them, whereas, what we had, was owned by our creditors. I was prepared to acknowledge this fact and to live accordingly. I was aware that I could enjoy the privileges that other family members had but I did not deem it worth. I looked only at what was necessary with regard to food and clothing. For the parish feast, every kid was given money to give as offering as well as to buy whatever he wanted or liked. I came to know that my own siblings and cousins received money from my mother and father. I didn't ask anyone. Nobody remembered me. When each one returned home from church with the things they liked, I was seen to be poor. I accepted the pain gleefully. Since I had started thinking about entering religious life, I was guided by the thought that I had to renounce everything and leave. Knowing that I did not have anything, some of them tried to share their candies and other things with me. But I didn't feel like it. I felt it was like alms. From that day, I desired to embrace a life of poverty more biting than what I had to experience till I entered religious life."

Thus, the poverty-induced difficulties at home led Ittooppunni to whole-heartedly embrace a spirit of poverty and to optimistically embark on a fruitful journey towards total renunciation.

Ittooppunni did his schooling till grade four in the elementary school at Puthumanasserry. One day, the teacher asked the students: "How many of you are going to study till grade 10?" Fr. Dunston explains: "Several children stood up; even some, who were from poorer families than mine. I had learnt that I should complete grade ten in order to become a priest. Still, I didn't dare stand up and respond to the teacher's question. I feared that my parents could not afford it, even though I was convinced that I was financially better placed compared to many students in that school. In some ways, I was richer than many of them. Since then, I learnt not to be influenced by external appearances, but to delve into more profound realities. I was also willing to acknowledge it."

At the age of eight and a half, Ittooppunni passed from grade four. His father did not feel confident enough to enrol him in the high school immediately. If he was admitted in grade four in High School, he had to cope with the students who had studied English for one year. His father feared that his son would not be able to cope, even if he repeated a year in the same class. He thought about it as put forth by Fr. Seraphion. Besides, a Nair youth in Pattipparambu forced his father to admit Ittooppunni in the High School. He also took up the responsibility of teaching him English at his residence. The encouraging words of the youth wiped out the father's fears. Thus, Ittooppunni happened to join grade four in the High School. For about a month, on the way to school, he

spent some time learning English at the youth's house. He offered this service free of cost.

To Religious Life, with a Lot of Hope

Fr. Dunston recounts his experience after entering religious life. Ittooppunni accepted the indigence he and his family had suffered from childhood, and held it as a very important part of his life: "I was disappointed when with regard to the poverty in religious life. I had expected a real experience of poverty. By God's grace, I could get my heart's fill of it, to a certain extent, during my stay at Ayiroor. Even there, I did not have to undergo the sufferings that I had experienced at home. When I did suffer pangs of poverty after entering religious life, I would ask myself: "Didn't I enter religious life to experience far deeper poverty than what I had at home?" With that, all my worries would fade out. This love for poverty kept me above everything. This helped me to maintain nobility of mind without acting smarmy. He who has no needs is richer than the rich. The rich become poor when they harbour desires which is beyond their riches. I found it easy to be satisfied with what I have and to adapt with the situation."

Fr. Dunston often repeated this idea in the community: "In religious life we should not enjoy more comforts than what we had at home." His life at Attappady was an opportunity for Fr. Dunston to realize and express his convictions to perfection, and to testify to them in a trustworthy manner, among the people. He continues: "What I said about the necessity of being contented with what one had, and to adapt to the situation, was limited only to enjoyment of material things and physical comforts. This advice did not hold true when it came to getting along with the thoughts and ideals of

others." Reminding himself of the Lord's promise of gaining hundredfold, for those who renounce their family members or things (Mt 19:29), Fr. Dunston would ask the candidates, "If so, what would one, who renounces his own mind, get?"

Signs of Interiority

The simplicity in lifestyle and behaviour, sustained by Fr. Dunston, is the main point of attraction. One can get the drift of his simplicity in his words, actions, dressing, walking, food, and in the objects of his daily use. These were all signs of the poverty that he loved interiorly. Fr. Dunston was much taken up by the divine verse: "look at the birds of the air..." He literally put into practise the axiom "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

When he prepares to leave a monastery where he is not a member, he would approach the Superior, and while bidding adieu, would sometimes tell him, "I have placed the blanket on the table. I didn't use it. So, it does not need to be washed."

He would throw away something only after making optimum use of the said object. He wore habits that had been torn, and repaired. He was not very particular about wearing footwear. He would walk around, mostly unshod. Even those that he wore would be quite simple, and at times, their pathetic condition, one, that that even the roadside shoe-repairer would disregard. As regards his shaving blade, when it became blunt with long use, he would reuse it after rubbing it on the wall. He could see value in those things that others threw away as waste. He took care to collect such materials and make them usable. He would collect the objects scattered around in the campus and store them carefully, expecting to use them again in some way. He would make

beautiful flowers out of paper and plastic covers and would give them to the chapel to be used for its decoration.

He did not have the habit of waiting in the bus shed. He would start walking, for instance, from Ambazhakkad to Varandarappilly. He would board the bus as and when the bus operators stop for him, while afoot. In those days, people in Pavaratty would joke thus about Fr. Dunston: "Father wouldn't raise his eyes for more than six feet. Wasn't that the rule for the religious? He had to walk on several occasions because of this. Father would see the name board of the bus only when it reaches six feet away from him. What else can he do but walk?"

In 1987, the golden jubilee of the religious profession of Fr. Abdias was celebrated at the Prior General House in Ernakulam. As the relative of the jubilarian, Fr. Dunston took part in it. On the way back, Fr. Dunston and his relatives stood waiting for the bus at the Ernakulam bus stand. When the Super Fast bus to Palakkad arrived, he, at first, ran to board it. But, he returned without getting in. "Let the Ordinary bus come" was his reasoning.

Compensation for 25 Paise

When Fr. Dunston was member of the Novitiate House at Saravanampatti, he received one hundred rupees from Fr. Joy Challisserry, the Procurator. After a month, Fr. Dunston told Fr. Joy, "I shall give you the account for Rs. 100." "Mmm!" Fr. Joy nodded. After some time, Fr. Dunston repeatedly told him about the account: "The account is still not complete. I see a lag of 25 paise." Fr. Joy tried to console him saying, "It's only a matter of 25 paise. I shall note it down as alms given." Fr. Dunston quite characteristically smiled and said, "That's not necessary. Let me check again." After a few days, Fr. Joy

saw a clearly tired Fr. Dunston entering through the gate. "I am returning from Gandhipuram after hearing Confessions of Sisters there. Instead of Viswasapuram, I alighted at Saravanampatti and walked from there." Fr. Dunston explained when enquired. Fr. Joy further probed, "Why did you do that? Did you not have enough money with you?" The reply was quite candid: "No. I wanted to settle the account with you. To compensate for the lost 25 paise, I walked the distance."

Instead of writing off 25 paise, he tried to perform a proportionate compensation, as per his understanding. He wrote 25 paise as bus fare. He thus, fulfilled his vow of poverty with sincerity and honesty.

Fear Is only When the Pocket Is Full

Fr. Dunston was at Little Flower Seminary, Saibaba Colony in 1989-90. Once, he returned from a long journey very late at night. By that time, the seminary gates were already locked. He moved to the Little Flower Monastery nearby to stay there overnight. Alas! the gates were locked there too. With nowhere to go, he walked back. While walking back, he sighted a bus parked just before the road from the monastery reached Alagesan Road; bus route number 25. Two people were engrossed in making minor repairs to the bus. He sought their permission, "Can I sleep this night in the bus?" They felt pity and granted permission. Fr. Dunston slept through the night in that bus.

On another occasion, Fr. Dunston reached Little Flower Monastery very late. With some help from the security guards, he could enter the campus. The priests and the staff were fast asleep. When the cook woke up in the morning, to his surprise, he saw Fr. Dunston sleeping on the bench placed

outside the monastery. He had not sought supper or blanket. He thought it better not to disturb them in their sleep.

In 1982, Fr. Dunston once embarked on a bus journey from the novitiate house at Ambazhakkad, to Kadalundy. The novices were staying at the monastery at Kadalundy as part of their formation. His memory having failed him, he did not alight from the bus even after the bus reached its last stop. It had already grown dark. There was no bus for a return journey. What was he to do? Fr. Dunston looked around. At a distance, he sighted a tea shop. He walked toward the shop. The shopkeeper was busy cleaning and rearranging things before he closed the shop for the day. "Can I sleep here tonight?" Fr. Dunston asked him. He was granted permission.

Gruel without Salt... Sambar Grown Old...

He considered a life of poverty to be precious. He continued to live out this lifestyle in the refectory too. At the tender age of five, as the desire to become a saint took root in him, he, together with his sister Kunjhethi, had taken a decision, as a sacrifice, not to add salt to food.

The sacrifices that he started in the dining table as a child, continued through his life. When he stayed alone at the monastery in Attappady, he used to satisfy his hunger eating pieces of coconut and drink the water that was used to boil dal. He made use of the same dal to be boiled for several days. Fr. Dunston would never complain if there was no food left when he returned at night after a long journey. Instead, he would satisfy his hunger with coconut pieces and vegetables.

When he consumed food from the convent, the Sisters would sometimes enquire whether he had eaten. His ready

response would be, "Somehow, hunger should be satisfied." A Sister testifies, "He was satisfied with whatever was given. With one look you can see that he was satisfied."

Every time he comes for food, he would check for the leftovers of the previous meal. While others will seek out fresh and tasty food, he would be satisfied with the old. His supper would be a potpourri of leftovers: *uppuma* from breakfast, *sambar* from lunch, *semiapayasam* from tea break, with a little rice. He would not throw away even fruits that were too ripe to the point of decay. He would eat the good parts of worm-infested mangoes and crumbling papayas. He was particular that nothing should be wasted just because it has become old.

One day *upma* was served for breakfast. Salt was on the higher side in the dish. While the novices were perplexed not knowing what to do, Fr. Dunston entered the scene. He tasted a little from the dish. There was no change in the expressions on his face. Then, he washed the *upma*, and started eating it. After breakfast, he went out into the garden as usual with a spade.

One of the novices who took care of Fr. Dunston fondly remembers him: "If milk was given to Father, he would take it with a little pickle or gravy. I used to be quite uncomfortable seeing this practice. Once I took it as a complaint to Fr. Master. He explained the matter to me. It was then that I understood the depth of his spirit of renunciation. After this experience he grew significantly in my esteem."

In his last days, when his food intake became alarmingly low, bystanders employed a trick. "Nobody wants this food. Let us throw it away." The moment such a statement was made, the patient would empty the plate.

Responding in a Balanced Manner

Fr. Dunston always maintained a sense of detachment towards celebrations and grandeur. When his feast and birthdays were celebrated in the ashram where he was a member or when Rector's Day was celebrated in formation houses, he did not stay away. He did not organize celebrations for himself. His thinking pattern was not guided by celebrations centred around him. He responded with equanimity towards anything organized for him. He cooperated with everyone with poise. An attitude in sync with the man who has renounced the world.

Though he was a man who has vowed poverty living as the Lord's *anawim*, he once contextually enquired of Fr. John Vianney, his nephew and a diocesan priest in Palakkad diocese, "Do you have a bank account?" When Fr. Vianney responded in the negative, he advised him, "Then, start a bank account immediately."

Composure in Loss

A person who has renounced everything cannot be attached to anything. It is an integral part of their life not to lose anything, conserving them for the future generations while maintaining perfect poverty in their own life. Also, they maintain detachment from worldly gains. They do not desire to accrue anything for themselves. Their composure is not shaken when they experience losses in life. They preserve their dignified equanimity even when they lose things they use regularly.

Here is a sharing of experience: "A brother from our senior batch was admitted in Vimal Jothi Hospital, Saravanampatti. On that day I took milk for him in a newly purchased flask. I

went on a bicycle. On entering the hospital campus, the flask hit on the cycle and the glass inside broke leaving the milk useless. I returned with much fear and remorse to the novitiate. When I explained the situation honestly to Fr. Dunston, our Rector, his response was: "Take milk in a different flask and go to the hospital... at the earliest..." As I was expecting a strong punishment and scolding, this was a big surprise and a deep consolation. He has never spoken to me about it. This unexpected response was a turning point in my life."

Inspiring a Communitarian Witness

Fr. Dunston lived in utter poverty in his personal life. It is not enough for a religious to be a saint alone. The Vatican II calls for the religious to be a communitarian witness. Subsequently, in line with the Council's clarion call, he wanted his community to witness together to religious poverty. Even if the individual religious practises poverty in its perfection, there is a real hold-up in the witness value if the community is perceived to be affluent. Hence, he would present ideas strongly in community discussions on the need for communitarian observance and witnessing of religious values. He reminded his confreres that when religious houses and institutions focus on grandeur, the message that goes out to the people is counter-productive and it is a counter-witnessing of our religious commitment. "Let us ask ourselves whether these things bring us closer to God." This was how he tried to remind the members when the various activities of the Congregation were explained.

He was conscious that it would be impossible to expect a large community to strictly adhere to the ideals that he yearned for them to. So, he wanted to gather like-minded

members who had an affinity towards a simple life, selected from various monasteries, to give a communitarian witness to a life of poverty. Several religious congregations had come into renewal in this manner.

Fr. Dunston shares: "According to this idea, the Provincial Synaxis (of Devamatha Province, Thrissur) had decided to initiate a centre with the sole purpose of simple life. I had consented to stay in such a centre when it was started. It was at this point of time that Fr. Provincial asked me to move to Attappady. I immediately accepted it." History testifies that his stint at Attappady was a realization of his ideals.

Sr. Rose Paul CHF, his relative, writes: "I was serving at a place called Pathambara in the period 1983-95. It was the highest terrain in Kannur district with no ordinary means of transportation. On hearing this, Fr. Dunston wanted to meet me. When we met, he enquired about the geographical conditions of the place. When I asked him the reason for such detailed enquiry, he said: 'I wish to make a tent and stay in solitude while also catering to the spiritual needs of the neighbourhood. I wanted to know whether this would be a suitable place. Only after ensuring the suitability of the place, I need to ask my superiors.' I could see the attitude of a hermit in him. 'It wouldn't suit you at this advanced age.' I suggested.

It was because of this earnest desire that he, along with Saju Chackalackal, a regent at that time, experimented with a life of poverty at Chennimalai near Erode for a few months in 1989.

Heeding to the desire of Fr. Dunston, Fr. Raphael Kannanaickal, then Provincial of Preshitha Province, Coimbatore, wrote a letter to Mar Joseph Irimben, Bishop of

Palakkad diocese (dated 29 November 1989): “Fr. Dunston has informed me of his desire to lead a life of simplicity and do gospel ministry. It would be good if Your Paternity could make an arrangement for the same in one of the diocesan centres without much pastoral responsibilities, preferably under a Vicar or in some small parish. I would recommend that, considering his age and health conditions, he be initially given an assignment for six months and then gradually for a longer period of time.”

Responding to Fr. Provincial’s letter, the bishop granted the station church at Kulakkattukurissy for ministry and communal practice of simple life to Fr. Dunston and Fr. Sunny Ukken.

Lover of the Poor

Fr. Dunston liked to live with whatever was available, was contented and cheerful under all conditions, eating what was available, and identifying with the poor, without any complaints. He wanted to move away from the comforts of the monastery and pitch his tent among the poor and needy.

Fr. Dunston was compassionate towards the poor. He would say that we should not make them lazy by doling out goodies but empower them to stand on their own. When he was in Ranchi, he happened to get in touch with a street hawker, who sold balloons, whistles, flowers on the streets. Father befriended him. “He will cheat you, Fr. Rector.” The aspirants warned. He never cheated him, for their Rector was poorer than the hawker. Besides, being, and interacting with the saintly presence, the hawker was lifted up to more goodness. Father taught him to make one more product - a special flower using China paper. Indeed, here was a man

with the elite thought of not simply giving alms but of teaching to make a better living.

A Totally Renounced Man of Realization

He trained himself to radically live out poverty. He stood aloof from all worldly pleasures and temptations of power and position. He did not wish to hold on to anything permanently. He did not consider anything his own. He did not deem it necessary to have anything for himself. He did not feel like having his own Bible or a pious article, not even a Crucifix of his own. His bosom relationship was not with the Crucifix but with the Crucified One. He did not keep for himself the gifts he received and, instead, shared them with others so much so that while breathing his last the only belongings he had were an old tin box and a few used clothes.

When he was Rector at Varandarappilly, his hair started to fall due to some fungus infection. If it had been treated immediately, his head would not have become bald. He used to say that he should have had it treated when there were few circles where hair started falling. Later, he suffered mental pain regarding this negligence. The disfiguring that the loss of hair caused him much grief. Someone teased calling him 'a cock with its feathers shorn off'. Fr. Dunston shares this experience: "When I went to some gatherings, I would wistfully wish for some hair. I compensated for the lost eyebrows by smartly placing the spectacles over it. I knew if I regularly applied medicine, the hair might grow back. I have a special interest in sowing seeds and seeing the plants grow. I thought about doing the same with my head too. However, I did not dare to do so because I thought I might lose sight of matters important to religious life." Many urged him to wear a wig over his head, but, he was not prepared to

do so. He thought that such attitudes could become an obstacle to his freedom. He nourished the sacrificial mentality within and subsequently, developed inner freedom. In fact, he enjoyed life. Absolute inner freedom was the core of the beauty of his life.

He observed the spirit of poverty not only towards possessions and positions, but also towards human relationships. He did not harbour any sort of complaints or grievances regarding anything. He maintained sanctity and disinterest in all his relationships within and without his family and the Congregation. He was totally shorn of the attitude of 'I', 'me' and 'mine'. His life was quite detached without any special interest towards any particular person or thing.

His supreme spiritual detachment was the fruit of his treasuring the sense of being beyond, without losing it ever. This dispassionate nature granted him seamless freedom in every aspect of his life. He experienced total bliss and joy with no reason to complain over anything.

A perfectly spiritual man! A selfless and liberated soul! A man with equanimity to the core! A noble priest with total renunciation!

Chapter 10

THE TREE, BLOOMING IN VIRTUES, SPREADS ITS AROMA

A fragrance emanated from Ittooppunni as he entered the novitiate. For sure, he might have applied *athar*. The novice master pulled him up and gave him a piece of his mind. A nonplussed Itooppunni said that he had not applied *athar*. The source of the fragrance, was, later, after a short enquiry, found to be the *laanki* flower in his pocket. Ittooppunni had brought the flower and also a few of its seeds from his house. This seems to be the story behind the fragrant *laanki* tree at the monastery in Ambazhakkad.

Fr. Dunston can be considered a flowering tree: a fragrant flowering tree that spreads its aroma far and wide. He brought forth flowers of virtues that adorned not only his life, but those of whom he interacted with.

No Beauty nor Comeliness but Full of Inner Splendour

No outward beauty or charm. No hair on the head, nor eyebrows. But, hidden behind the veil of this plain appearance was the grandeur of profound spirituality. He owned an inner beauty that far outdid any outward magnificence. He did not have the gift of the tongue to articulate in style the lofty principles of life. His life, more than his exhortations, drew people to him. The silent discourse ever echoing around him was "My life is my message." The joy of innocence always radiated from him. Even though many looked up to him as an exemplar, he did

not deem it worth his consideration. He took everything in his stride with a childlike smile.

His parents respected Ittooppunni. Fr. Dunston says, "I understood from their secret conversations that my parents considered me worthwhile. My elder sister and I were considered to be reserved by nature. We did not glorify ourselves. I understood from their conversations that our humble and quiet demeanour brought a sense of happiness to my parents.

"I had seen my dad correcting the mistakes of my elder siblings with much severity. But he did not display too much severity or too much tenderness towards me."

Fr. Dunston absorbed a profound spirituality very early in his life. Fr. Malachias, his spiritual father, exhorted him to prepare a comprehensive note of his spiritual experiences as a young priest.

It was with much simplicity and uprightness that Fr. Dunston dealt with others. He left an imprint of these virtues on those who met him. Once, two German nationals - Fr. Beisser and Sr. Gertrude - visited the novitiate house at Saravanampatti. Later, Fr. Antony Puthenangady met them happenstance in Germany. "We had visited your novitiate house. There, we met a frail old priest who has been weakened by age, but, who, nevertheless, kept himself cheerful through incessant prayer and austerities. He resembles St. Maximilian Kolbe."

The father of Fr. Joseph Elias Kannath speaks about priests gripped by the Holy Spirit: "I have seen several priests: some religious, some diocesan; anyone with the habit is a priest. But there are priests among priests. In this sense, I have seen

three priests. Among them, the first one is the *guruvochan* at Varandarappilly with no hair on his head (Fr. Dunston), the second one is the bearded Fr. Prior General at Ernakulam (Fr. Canisius), and lastly, Fr. Thoppilaan (Fr. Augustine Thoppil), who is at KESS. They are indeed priests filled with the Holy Spirit!”

Fr. Dunston’s was a saintly presence that filled those who meet him with good memories. “Is that holy priest keeping fine?” Such was the enquiry about Fr. Dunston in a letter from the family of a novice.

Love filled the hearts of all whom he ministered. Even when he was unable to do anything, many found joy with his ministry. People competed with one another, in serving him. By the end of 2005, Fr. Dunston was taken from Arul Malar Illam, Saravanampatti to St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara, where Fr. Winson Moilan and other members took good care of him. It went on well for three months. However, one day, quite unexpectedly, Fr. Davis Thattil ‘kidnapped’ him when Fr. Moilan was not in station. The ensuing days caused much pain to Fr. Moilan.

A few young men came to attend the funeral of Fr. Dunston. Fr. John Vianny, the fraternal nephew of Fr. Dunston, enquired about their relationship with Fr. Dunston. They informed him that they had the good fortune of meeting him during a journey. They had enjoyed a tête-à-tête with him. “Where are you going?” Fr. Dunston had asked them as they were about to part. They had replied, “We are going to watch a football match.” He joined them saying, “Oh, I like football. I shall join you.” His simple demeanour had enthralled them no end. The youngsters recognized him years later, on 21 October 2006, when the news of his demise

was published with a photo in the newspapers. They flew in to witness the funeral rites of the priest who had left a lasting impression upon them years before.

He left an indelible imprint upon the minds of the people he met. During the inaugural function of the novitiate house at Velanthavalam, Mar Jacob Manethodath, Bishop of Palakkad, made an observation looking at the stain glass-work of the Good Shepherd in the frontage of the chapel, "It's just like Fr. Dunston."

Living in the Light of Faith

As Fr. Dunston speaks about the parental influence in his autobiographical notes, he writes about a piece of thought that had helped make his life from his younger days quite happy.

"I happened to hear an idea again from my father many years after he had read it to me, explained and exhorted me to practise it. This idea practically guided me everyday. When I came to know that it had also guided my father for a long time, its impact gathered strength. I was quite joyous on discovering that I had several similarities with my dad.

"What my dad read for me was a small story: Among a group of pilgrims was a man who, whatever happened, would joyfully say, 'I praise God Who did this good thing.' One day, he broke his leg when he was running fast to get into the ship. As was his wont, he happily praised God for the special blessing. Those who heard him, mocked him saying, 'What good did come to you now? In fact, you are incapacitated and cannot partake in a pilgrimage that could have earned you much spiritual riches.' They left him stranded and boarded the ship. Within a few days, news

arrived that the ship had sunk, and that all aboard were dead. Thus, did those who ridicule him, understand what “good” God had done to him. This story had helped me put my trust in the Divine Providence and to maintain peace and joy in the face of any difficult situation.

“Right from the age of five, God’s grace and the light of faith were easily available to me. One day, along with my elder brother I brought a few cuttings of Edward Rose from an uncle’s house and planted them. After a few days, one of them brought out a shoot and in that only shoot a flower blossomed. Alas, by 4 in the evening that flower went missing. Since the one who plucked the flower had exerted force, the plant which had only started putting out roots had been shaken. My brother asked me as to who had plucked the flower. I replied that I didn’t know. He kept interrogating me as if I were lying. It was beyond what I could swallow. Yet, I was able to remain calm telling myself that God knows the truth.

“I shall now narrate an experience that gave an opportunity for faith to be ceaselessly at work. That was a period where you heard lot of stories about the devil. I was fearful by nature. When it was dark I wouldn’t dare to move even from one room to the other without support. There was a densely forested area on the way from my house to the church. There were several stories about that place. I had heard that many people had been frightened as the devil jumped from one side of the road to the other taking the form of animals. It was a very difficult proposition for me to walk by that way to the church early in the morning. I would deem it a huge relief if I came across any passerby when I reach that area. But, as luck would have it, usually I wouldn’t encounter anyone there. I would begin praying with much devotion

when I reached the area. I would take the cross and chain from under the shirt and put them over it. Then I would walk with courage." Thus, faith came to his rescue, in overcoming his fear.

The lessons that Ittooppunni learnt from his father remained with him till his death. He had not seen his father despondent even when life was miserable. The most precious patrimony handed down to Fr. Dunston was the trust in God, which enabled his father to pray with serenity and to wait with hope, surrendering everything to God even when he was neck-deep in debt.

In his exhortation to the people who approached Fr. Dunston for spiritual direction or confession, one can see plenty of phrases citing the importance of placing trust in God, such as "God will give," "God will help," etc. He did not complain even when he was suffering from physical or mental pain. Instead, he would chant ejaculations like "God help me," "God save me," and "God, I love You."

Walking in the Love of the Neighbour

Loving his brethren whole-heartedly was a characteristic of Fr. Dunston. He owned a heart that was open enough to include everyone. His attitude was that of wanting good for all, respecting all and trusting all. He was careful from his early years to accept everyone and to respect feelings. He maintained as a tenet of his life, the following: "You have to forego your own interests in many cases if you want to maintain peace with others."

Fr. Dunston remembers an incident that happened when he was very young: "When I was in second form, my little sister Mary was bedridden with an attack of chickenpox.

When she started feeling better, she would come and sit near me. I had learnt that this ailment can spread through the air. I didn't like her careless behaviour. She was sitting next to me and talking as she was unaware that it was contagious. I feared I would contract the disease as I could even smell the odour emanating from her mouth. Yet, I didn't say a word so as not to hurt her sentiments. I sat there prepared to face whatever came my way. Predictably, I fell sick after a few days but I was glad that I hadn't hurt the feelings of my little sister."

In 1976, aspirants for Sagar Region were sent to Ranchi for Pre-degree studies. The ticket inspector slapped a fellow traveller who was travelling without a ticket. When the aspirants wrote about this incident for the province newsletter, they came up with the title 'TTR plays Tabla on the Cheek'. Immediately Fr. Rector corrected them. He taught them that every person should be respected and no one deserves to be insulted.

At the novitiate in Saravanampatti, Fr. Antony Puthe-nangady, the Novice Master, was not in station in the evening on 23 April 1986. So, Fr. Dunston was incharge. Some men from the army came that way. Perhaps it was because they saw a large empty space in front of the house, that they stopped their vehicles by the road. Their leader approached Father and requested permission to pitch their tent overnight in the empty space. He granted them permission without much delay. He did not give any excuses such as: "Superior is not in station." or "I don't have the authority." Fr. Dunston told the novices, "They are protecting our country. We are bound to give them necessary convenience to stay." The novices were inspired by the natural response of Fr. Dunston to the request of the army personnel.

Fr. Dunston was keenly interested in caring for the sick. He dealt with the sick with much love. Once a novice met with an accident and was hurt in the leg and admitted in hospital. Fr. Dunston patted him on his leg, drew the sign of the Cross on it and consoled him saying, "We should happily accept the sufferings that God gives us." His love conquered the heart of the novice.

He was careful not to cause trouble to anyone even when he was bedridden. He did not speak of the different pains he was suffering. He tried not to wake the caretaker who slept in his room at night. He had fallen down on occasions as he tried to get up from the bed and walk by himself, not wanting to disturb his sleeping bystander.

One day it was the time when night prayers were over in the novitiate at Saravanampatti. It was Bro. Jose Kaithavalappil's turn to stay with him that night. Bro. Jose reached the room. Fr. Dunston was lying on the bed engrossed in meditation. The brother arranged a mat on the floor and lay down. After some time, father jumped from bed as if he saw a dream. "Brother, you can use my cot and bed." Jose did not accept the offer. Fr. Dunston leant on his bed only after compelling brother to use a blanket and a sheet.

As the chillness increased during the night, Bro. Jose covered Fr. Dunston with a blanket. Both had a good night's sleep. The caretaker woke up when the bell rang in the morning. The blanket which he had covered Fr. Dunston without his knowledge was upon Bro. Jose. Fr. Dunston was sitting on his bed with an innocent smile.

Even when his memory was fading, the ailing brethren received special love and affection from Fr. Dunston. His love and compassion were never found wanting. His words of

consolation to the sick were, "Don't worry. Everything is going to be alright!" When any of the brothers fell sick, he would encourage Fr. Rector to take them to hospital and would even volunteer to take them personally. When Fr. Dunston was ailing, and showed reluctance to go to hospital, one of the novices would act sick. He would then invariably be in the forefront to treat the 'patient'.

Once, Fr. Dunston went with a novice to Vimal Jothi Hospital for regular check-up. However, there, pointing to the novice, he told the doctor, "Doctor, I am fine. I think he is not well. Kindly check him." On returning to the house, he repeated the same to Fr. Superior: "Father, I am keeping fine. I think the one who came with me is not well."

Manual Labour for Spiritual Growth

Fr. Dunston enjoyed manual labour; it was a part of his spirituality. He considered it as an integral part of his life of poverty and prayer. Troubles and temptations are normal in life. He believed that physical labour can assist in overcoming them.

He did not back out of any type of work. He took up gardening and cleaning of his surroundings happily. Even if the candidates failed to do menial jobs such as cleaning the house or campus, washing dishes, or such acts of *ashram seva*, due to carelessness or languor, he would take it upon himself to do them without any difficulty.

There was a peculiar type of chinch - Rubber chinch - creating a lot of problems in Varandarappilly. These creatures would enter the chapel at night. When Fr. Dunston was the Prior there, the aspirants would see him cleaning the

whole chapel early in the morning to rid the chapel of these creatures, and feel inspired.

On many days, one could see Fr. Dunston taking a pick-axe and entering the garden soon after breakfast. He would be involved in gardening like any candidate. The 83-year-old Fr. Dunston entering the garden with a spade and chopper was indeed an inspiration to the 18-year-old novices.

The campus at the novitiate house in Saravanampatti had plenty of *karuga*, (grass that spreads its roots very deep) and *manjhappaavatta* (a bushy weed that grows into a tree). Fr. Dunston patiently rooted out these adamant weeds little by little. The varieties of grass weeds (*muthangha* and *karuga*) became the subjects of his meditation. He would demonstrate to the novices how to remove them with the root from the depths using the implements like fork, spade and pick-axe. If we clean the top soil alone, their roots are not affected at all. During such sessions of gardening, he would instil in the novices the message that, if one is to root out the weeds, cleanse the stains and let strong sprouts of holiness to bloom, a novice would be well prepared.

Once, Fr. Dunston and an aspirant planted tapioca in the garden. Two days later, he gave the brother seeds of some greens and asked him to sow them where they planted tapioca. "How can tapioca and greens grow together?" asked the confused brother. "Tapioca cultivation is difficult here. Rats will eat them up. Then the greens will come in handy." Fr. Dunston explained, and added: "Only the small can last in religious life." As he said, tapioca was totally eaten up by rats and bandicoots; the greens, however, were a big success.

Even when he was not capable of involving himself in manual labour, he did not stay away from his duties. He liked

to walk. As he walked, he would remove the dry leaves. He would pick the dry coconut leaves and twigs and collect them near the kitchen. He would collect fruits from the trees. He would enter the kitchen and put them in the store for the community. He regarded all fruits, however small, to be useful for the community, and so never ate them by himself.

He would come to the chapel early morning before the others did, and open the windows. After night prayers, he would leave the chapel only after ensuring that all windows were closed. He found satisfaction in fulfilling little things for the community.

Nature, a Realization

Fr. Thomas Achandy recounts his experience thus: When Fr. Dunston was at Attappady, Fr. Thomas was involved in the humongous project for the English translation of a twelve volume Latin collection with 84,000 pages - *Hortus Malabaricus* - that dealt with the herbal plants in Kerala. He stayed with Fr. Dunston during this activity. Translating a collection of books written in Old Latin, about 400 years earlier, was a herculean task. It was Fr. Dunston who clarified all doubts in Old Latin for Fr. Thomas. Besides, he would take Fr. Thomas to the garden from time to time, show him the herbs that were illustrated in the books and explain their characteristics. He could see a true lover of nature who not only loved plants and flowers but also had sound knowledge about them.

When he was the Aspirants' Rector, he would return from his various travels with lots of plants with which he beautified the surroundings. He found immense happiness in enhancing the beauty of nature.

Fr. Dunston shares: "When I went by myself to schools and churches, I would walk around looking at the trees, plants and flowers. In this way, I would reach the church or school in my own time." For a person who, from his childhood, was used to silently conversing with trees, plants and flowers, nature turned out to be a means for realization, as he grew older. This realization flowed freely when he was in Attappady during 1973-77.

He removed the weeds and grew vegetables; planted trees and plants; removed grass and cleansed the area in and around the house. He cared for nature and lived by becoming one with it. He found God in it. Fr. Dunston says, "The beauty of nature in Attappady drew me closer to God. I enjoyed the sunrise and sunset. During cool seasons, at the crack of dawn, I would stand mesmerised looking at the beauty of the foam-like clouds unhurriedly traversing from east to west and west to east."

He found God in everything; found everything in God. As a result, his life became blessed. It was an awakening in tune with nature and profoundly deep. Fr. Dunston, who did not hold on to anything nor was enslaved by anything, was totally detached, but truly enjoyed life. His enjoyment was an attitude of sacrifice. It was a creative way of loving creation based on divine inspiration.

Chapter 11

INNER THIRST TO BE SENT

At the monastery in Pavaratty, individuals who desired to embrace the Christian faith, were welcomed into the Church; a trade was taught, aid and guidance provided in getting them married, and in settling down as a good Christian family. In order to strengthen them in their faith, it was a practice there to entrust such newly formed families to a traditional Christian family. The Olakkengal family made the family of Mr. Ouseph, thus entrusted to them, to stay near them in their own land. He had total freedom in Olakkengal family.

Ittooppunni's father taught letters to Ouseph at night, by writing them on the sand. The children used to initially address Ouseph by name. After being instructed by their parents, however, they started addressing him as '*Ouseph chettan*'. The eldest daughter of Mr. Ouseph received her first holy communion along with Ittooppunni. Burning midnight's oil, Ittooppunni's father prepared a crown of paper flowers for both. Fr. Dunston remembers: "He had imbibed the spirit of our family. That was the area of evangelization for our family."

At the end of June, when they celebrated the special month dedicated to the Sacred Heart, twelve children were invited. Ittooppunni's father would evaluate their knowledge of Catechism, instruct them and feed them after the prayers were over. This tradition in the family instilled in Ittooppunni a thirst to become a missionary in a distant land.

Ittooppunni made it a part of his prayer his desire to be soon sent to a distant land as a missionary. This happened soon after his First Holy Communion. "I should leave my place, go to some foreign land and, if possible, work there till death." By 'distant land' he meant parts of Persia and Arabia; somewhere beyond Arabian Sea.

Inspired by the family charism, Fr. Dunston, throughout his life, was careful to respond positively to the signs of the love of Christ exhibited by the people of other religions.

To Ambikapur...

Ambikapur was the first place beyond Kerala where CMI members were called for missionary work. Fr. Dunston was one among the three who volunteered to go there. But that wish did not materialize. Fr. Dunston himself explains:

"Some years after my Ordination, I was preparing to leave for Ambikapur. As there were not many priests for the ministries of the Congregation, I had planned to prepare more candidates for brotherhood after reaching Ambikapur. However, I was forced by the prevailing situations then, to do here itself what I had planned to do in Ambikapur. Thus, I served as Master of brothers for more than three months. Before that, there was no proper training for candidates for brotherhood in Devamatha Province. I, who was to go to Ambikapur, was made the Rector of the Aspirants. This happened in 1956. Though I was told it was for one year, the appointment remained for long.

Dream Realized in Attappady

St. Joseph's Bhavan was established at Pakulam, Attappady in 1968. In the first four years, four Superiors took charge one

after the other. The living conditions and the difficulties in travelling made the members reluctant to go to Attappady. Those who went there as members of the house showed undue urgency to return. When Fr. Dunston, the Superior of Provincial House till 1973, got the opportunity to go to Attappady where no one wished to go, his heart was filled with joy. He expressed his consent with overwhelming joy. He enthusiastically set off on his journey. He regarded it to be the mission experience he had been waiting for long.

Reaching Attappady, Fr. Dunston dedicated himself totally to the service of the people there. He was a much-respected assistant who would take up any challenge or face any difficulty to go whenever and wherever the parish priests required. Just as he did in other places, he travelled barefoot to offer Holy Eucharist in the various parish churches in and around Attappady. He served as the Vicar for five months in the parishes of Jellippara and Thavalam. As he saw that travelling on the road from Thavalam to Jellippara after offering Mass took long, he traversed across the mountains. In those days, regular Mass and a resident Vicar were available only at Thavalam. On several days Fr. Dunston would go to the convent at Kottathara to hear Confessions and offer Holy Mass. Transport facilities were very scarce. He walked without sandals the whole stretch of 15 kms from Pakulam to Kottathara. On rare occasions, he would find a bus.

He got in touch with the tribals of the nearby village of Osthiyur. He organized *nyaayampeshal* (justice meetings - meetings to solve issues and establish truth and justice) both in their village as well as at the ashram. He started a small savings program for the villagers, who had never had the habit of saving before.

Fr. Dunston describes his life in the context of Attappady as a kind of realization. This realization was connected with both God and human beings. Firstly, it was related to God. The natural beauty of Attappady drew him closer to God.

“The second realization was in relation with human beings. I could establish a personal relationship with the tribals. I had a feeling that I was living for them. My relationship with the tribals reflected in my prayer. I could see them in my prayers. This part of the fourth *Anaphora* from the Holy Eucharist was a subject of much meditation and reflection: ‘... that You alone are God the Father, and You sent Your beloved Son Jesus Christ... let all men know that He taught all those who became children of the Holy Catholic Church the necessary path to holiness ...’”

He had a strong inspiration to live in such a way that everyone knew, as a child of the Catholic Church, that Jesus had taught him the path to holiness. He saw the presence of the children of the Church, who did not live in this way, to be an obstacle to the conversion of others. He decided that through his saintly life, others should come to learn about God, the Father, and the path to holiness that the children of the Church are provided with.

Guided by this conviction, Fr. Dunston led an honest and simple life that earned him the trust of the tribals. He told those who approached him seeking money as gift or as debt that he did not have any; and, it was the truth, too. Nobody believed him in the beginning. Once when he denied money to a person, the man became angry and pointed at him a 50 paise coin and said, “You have no money? Take this.” But gradually, when the people came to know more closely of the lifestyle of Fr. Dunston, they started to believe him. He

earned their acceptance and confidence. He also succeeded in preaching the Word of Christ to the poor among them.

Once Fr. Dunston failed to take the bus fare with him. It was only when the conductor reached out to him with the ticket that he was aware that he didn't have the fare. "I forgot. I shall give you tomorrow." "Poor *saamy* (father), a good one." Saying these words, the conductor sought his blessings.

When Fr. Dunston left Attappady after four years of ministry, the village folks from Osthuyur gave him a grand farewell. Singing and dancing, they spoke of the loving services he rendered to them. As part of the farewell the tribals even repaired the path from the main road to the house, so that cars could be driven up to the house.

If asked of the period in his life that he enjoyed the most, Fr. Dunston would invariably choose his stint at Attappady.

Lord, Send Me...

When Fr. Paulson Kannanaickal, the missionary to Kenya, recounted his mission experiences, Fr. Dunston expressed his eagerness to go to Kenya. He expressed his wish to pray for the missionaries involved in various ministries in Kenya as well as to hear the Confessions of the Kenyan people. However, it was not for him to visit Kenya.

Once, Mar Pastor Neelankavil, Bishop of Sagar diocese, sought the assistance of Fr. Dunston, seeing that his diocesan priests and religious needed a spiritual director. Even though he expressed his consent immediately, situations did not allow it.

The Evangelizing Scope of Sainthood

It had been the inner thirst of Ittooppunni to become a saint since he was five years old. The intention for the same had a divinely inspired and gradual evolution from merely being a means to get worldly glory. Patriotism was the first inspiration for the desire to become a saint. Fr. Dunston says, "I passionately wished that India had her own saint in this modern age. I believed that the conversion of this country depends on it. The world must realize the greatness and the capabilities of faith. Let the world understand that the Catholic faith has the strength to inspire an individual to accept sacrifices and to surrender one's life from seven years of age until death. May God deem it acceptable to reveal His glory in India. I will show You to the millions in India."

Chapter 12

A DISCERNING APOSTLE OF VOCATIONS

Vocation promotion was an area quite close to the heart of Fr. Dunston. Throughout his life in the Congregation, he considered it his foremost duty to find youth with a vocation and to nurture their vocation. His activities were inspired by a broad vision. He was not limited by the confines of merely adding members to the CMI Congregation to which he belonged, but was guided by a wider perspective in cultivating vocations. He was urged forward by the comprehensive vision that we all belong to the Church, all vocations are for the Church, our duty is to enable individuals to find their vocation and accept it and that through all these the Church continues to flourish. That is why he did not lament when he saw those whom he had met during his pastoral ministry, and nurtured through months or years of personal relationships, join other Congregations or dioceses. He believed that his efforts would turn out to be an effective manure for the tree of the Church to thrive.

Fr. Dunston believed it to be a misconception that the strength of a religious congregation lay in the number of its members. In the beginning stages, many who wanted to join were sent back. It was not an easy task to join a religious order. His regarded as unhealthy, the prevailing practice, to go all out in search of candidates under the cover of 'nurturing vocations' with the aim of merely adding members to the religious orders.

All Vocations Are Precious

Thomas More was the ideal man for Fr. Dunston from quite early in his life. He understood from the saint that being a good Catholic is more important than being a religious or a priest. Thomas More believed that it was more salvific to be a good Catholic than a bad religious. Therefore, Fr. Dunston believed that the first formation for the candidates should be on how to be a good Catholic. He endeavored to strengthen this belief in them. He stressed in his exhortations that it was more important to join together in heaven than become a priest or profess vows in the congregation.

He was conscious of the role of the laity in the Church. Was it not Thomas More, a lay person, who came in as the protector of Church principles when the Cardinal and priests in the English Church had gone astray? He wanted to see those who left the Congregation become a strength of the Church by living as exemplary lay Catholics. "He was a good child. He went home. I have lost the boy." These were the words of lamentation from a dejected formator on seeing a candidate whom he had nurtured leave the Congregation. To the lamenting formator, Fr. Dunston replied consolingly, "Don't we need good children at home too? Just consider that you formed them and sent them home as gentlemen."

When his fraternal nephew John Maria Vianney wanted to become a priest, Fr. Dunston did not persuade him to join the CMI Congregation. Instead, he gave him the freedom to choose the congregation of his choice, according to the inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

Fr. Dunston was appointed the spiritual director of the Brothers' Unit (1991-93) in the CMI Congregation. He gave it his best in order to ensure a conducive environment for the

brothers' community to flourish. He welcomed the candidates with paternal love and made them comfortable. He celebrated every new institution started by the brothers.

Bro. Savio, a fraternal nephew of Fr. Dunston, was the Superior of the Jyothi Ashram, the Postulants House of Malabar Missionary Brothers (MMB) Congregation at Pattikkad in 1985. As per the wish expressed by Bro. Savio, Fr. Dunston would frequent the house to meet the brothers individually and to give exhortation in the community. Brother wrote: "The children liked the visits by Father. They would eagerly await his arrival. They would share their inner secrets with him. Many of them have made their Perpetual Profession and are placed in various ashrams now. They used to say that they haven't forgotten his exhortations. MMB Congregation cannot forget Fr. Dunston."

The Special Charism of Discernment

It was a special charism of Fr. Dunston to be able to closely observe the events and experiences associated with himself, evaluate the various perspectives of the facts and to reach independent conclusions. He acquired this gift from his father. The counsels of his wise father left a profound influence upon Ittooppunni.

"My dad was a reflective person, who talked a lot. I deeply trusted in his advice. I respected his prudence, diplomacy and intellectual acumen. His special words of wisdom to my brother on certain occasions had been quite beneficial to me. Those pieces of advice had a strong grip over my character and activities. One such advice was as follows: "Good and bad fruits are possible for each of our actions. So, think how much good and bad might result from an action. Also, ponder on how much good and bad might result from not

doing that action. Then you will be able to decide on whether or not to do the action. In short, 'what would happen if you do or not do an action.' Another piece of advice was, 'Your hand should not fall on anyone else.' This advice was due to the fact that my brother was short-tempered. This exhortation proved to be beneficial for me. It saved me from many disasters. My 'tendency to be excessively conscientious in taking decisions' was derived from it. This diligence helped not only in disciplining my own life but also in the formation of others."

Fr. Casimir Alappatt says the following in reference to the formation methods of Fr. Dunston: "Spiritual directors are like eagles." There is a saying, 'like the eyes of *garudan* (an eagle). Eagles are known for their keen eyesight by which they can spot their prey on the ground even when they fly at a very high altitude. A guru is one who possesses the necessary farsightedness to discern the vocation of his disciples in the light emanating from the Divine Sun.

Discernment of vocations was a characteristic feature of Fr. Dunston. His focussed vision never went wrong in evaluating candidates. He once advised a novice, who did not have the aptitude for religious life, to leave the congregation. But he did not accept the advice. He had to leave the Congregation after his Priestly Ordination.

He viewed everything with eyes of wisdom. He understood the uniqueness of each individual. He assisted them to surmount the adversities in life and to choose the vocation that suited them.

T. V. Jose was a CMI aspirant at Varandarappilly. Now, he is a Jesuit priest. He recalled that it was Fr. Dunston, his

Rector, who discerned his vocation and led him to the Jesuit Congregation.

He calmed those who came to him with a disturbed mind and provided them with strength and inspiration for remaining firm in their vocation. He dealt with special consideration to those who approached him with the need for an extra dose of love. In the challenging situations of their life, his soothing presence was a source of consolation to them. He conquered with tenderness and innocence, the people who came to him with their worries and anxieties. He confirmed them in their vocation like a real prophet. Those who had decided to leave the Congregation, became confident members owing to his distinctive care.

One of his disciples remembers: "It was Fr. Dunston who taught me to respond with love and sincerity in the face of stubbornness and misunderstanding. When there came situations that led me to feel like leaving the Congregation, it was Fr. Dunston who strengthened me to continue here. I gratefully remember it even today."

A certain individual who never gave a thought about his vocation happened to enter the Aspirants' House at Varandarappilly just because he was forced to do so. Three months went by in fear and angst. One day, he approached Fr. Dunston mustering some courage and opened up. Fr. Dunston patiently heard him through. His response was contrary to the expectations. "Vocation is not something that comes directly from above. God calls; we understand it through various individuals. I think you have certain qualities required for a vocation to religious life... You have nothing to do returning home now for the time to join college is long over. We shall think over this matter by the end of the

year, and take a decision. By the end of the year, however, the brother had got accustomed to the seminary environment. There was never any further need for discussions regarding his vocation. He believes it was Fr. Dunston's timely intervention that provided an opportunity for him to persevere in his vocation, go on to become a CMI religious priest and serve God in various fields.

An aspirant in Varandarappilly sought permission from Fr Dunston, his Rector, at least on five instances, to leave the Congregation. Every time Fr. Dunston would listen with much patience and calmness to all that he said and strengthened him with long exhortations. Every time he returned from the Rector's room, Fr. Dunston would say, "Brother, you have a vocation. Don't mind these tribulations. Read a lot."

Finally, he decided he could not take it anymore, and firmly resolving to return home, the brother approached Fr. Rector. Fr. Dunston, moving away from his usual routine, took the brother to chapel and spent an hour in adoration. Then they had lunch together and came back to the room of Fr. Rector and continued with his counselling. Fr. Dunston intermittently dozed off and woke up in between the dialogue. Every time he woke, he sought forgiveness. Just before leaving his room, Fr. Dunston told the aspirant, "Brother, you have a vocation; don't throw it away. If you want to go from here, you can go by tomorrow. If you decide not to go, I want you to hold my hand and promise that you will never again ask to leave." The disciple sobbed hearing the words of the master. He was confused as to his next move. At last, he stood up, held the hand of his loving master and gave the requested promise. He writes: "Words cannot express the strength that these words have conferred on me

while facing strenuous and complicated situations in my later life.”

A Guide for Survival

The fraternal and endearing presence of Fr. Dunston would console those in mental agony, caused by the challenges in their life. Once, Fr. Dunston consoled a scholastic, who was ordered to compulsory Regency saying, “Dear Varghese (name changed), do you want to be a good priest or a priest in a hurry? You need patience to be a good priest.”

One of the disciples of Fr. Dunston recounts an experience with him:

“He possessed a prophetic vision and imparted a wonderful and invaluable spiritual guidance that I enjoyed throughout my life.

“When I was in Varandarappilly he told me, ‘Evaluating your capacities and skills, your life in this community and your vocation to this congregation may not help produce fruit. You may join the Jesuit order. I will help you join that order... If you continue in the CMI congregation, you will have to offer to the Lord the buds of your life, neither the flowers nor the fruits.’ I did not value these words at first. But, these words of my Rector, helped me a lot to survive many critical situations of my life.

“When I was in Varandarappilly a few of us were sent to college studies to Irinjalakuda; even though I had higher marks than the others, I was not chosen. It was disappointing. But I was able to overcome the disappointment when I remembered Fr. Dunston’s words.

“When I finished my bachelor’s degree in the university in Bangalore, I was honoured with a rank in science subjects and with a national merit scholarship. But, I was sent to Sagar to work in the orphanage at Shampura. Many of my companions, on the other hand, were sent for higher studies. I had difficult and embarrassing moments when professors and classmates asked me, ‘Why didn’t you go for higher studies?’ Then, it was Fr. Dunston’s words that gave me courage and confidence in myself, to continue in religious life.

“In another instance, I had achieved a distinction in my exams in theology. But I was sent to take care of a farm in Shampura while my classmates were sent to Rome for further studies.

“While I was sick in Sagar, my request to go for studies (M.Sc.) in Christ College, Irinjalakuda, was granted. It was a very difficult situation to continue M.Sc. course after a break of six years post B.Sc. But, by the grace of God, I secured the highest mark in Christ College with three gold medals and was awarded the third rank in the university. But I was sent to teach in a Lower Primary School in Sironj. In all these instances, I always remembered Fr. Rector’s prophetic words that remained in my mind.

“These words may be more about me than about Fr. Dunston, but these prophetic words helped me survive difficult moments in my life with a smile. His spiritual guidance, the fruit of his genuine spiritual life, was always appreciated by all.”

Chapter 13

A WISE FORMATOR

For a lion's share of his religious life, Fr. Dunston was appointed to the CMI formation houses. He led the ministry of forming the new generations of CMI religious as follows: 2 years as novice master at the novitiate house at Saravanampatti; 17 years as Rector of the Aspirants at Varandarappilly, Elthuruth, Ranchi, Saibaba Colony, Kaundampalayam, Palakkad and Kozhinjampara. For over a quarter of a century, he spent his life as part of formation ministry, being an inspirational presence for the candidates, either as a member of the formation house or of the formation team.

He considered himself unworthy of being a formator though he remained in the field for several years. He says, "I did not desire to work in the field of formation. I have not thought myself deserving to do it. I continued to suffer due to my limitations. I repeatedly sought my Superiors to change my ministry, in vain. My memory failed me, my hair fell, the little physical looks I had was lost forever. I assumed that, in the light of these problems, I would be given a different set of responsibilities. But, it didn't happen. Eventually, when I was shifted from formation and appointed Prior at Varandarappilly, I found myself wanting in administrative skills, but I was happy that the formation ministry had finally been taken away from me."

Even though he had to continue in the field of formation despite his reluctance, he maintained a positive approach.

"I still see God's hand everywhere." That is why he could involve himself as a full time formator with all his heart, soul,

and mind. He surrendered his whole personality for this responsibility.

To the question as to how his formation ministry helped his spiritual life, he replies: "I was compelled to get better. This responsibility helped me to live with more sincerity."

Knew the Candidates

Fr. Dunston, who had wholeheartedly submitted himself to formation, knew the candidates personally. He discerned each one's uniqueness. He knew the specific qualities of each aspirant and treasured them in his mind. Even when he was immersed in his work in his room, he could identify his children by their foot movements.

Listened with the Heart

Though the presence of Fr. Dunston was beautifully silent, it always exuded life and was ever creative. He did not have any inhibition in talking to, or openly sharing his thoughts with anyone. He was always prepared for it. Ideas were aplenty; his sincerity, even more. No one who approached him had to return in despair. Knowledge and ideas seamlessly flowed in its fullness. Moreover, this overflowing of thoughts and knowledge was not stained by the conceited boastfulness or ambitions of pride. We can find a sheer blossoming of an open mind and generous heart.

The candidates could approach him at any time for any of their needs. Anyone who wanted could boldly approach him and share openly. He always kept his ears open for all who approached him. He was prepared to listen to the wishes and difficulties any number of times from anyone who cared to share them. He could include anyone in the generosity of his

heart. He received each one without any prejudice. He could profoundly comprehend the thoughts and emotions and respond with excellent sensitivity. Listening was yet another aspect of Fr. Dunston's charism.

Intelligent Mother

What should the formator be to the children who leave their parents and arrive at the Aspirants House? According to the perception of Fr. Dunston, he should be an intelligent mother. He writes, (in the Aspirants House) "The first few months can be quite tedious to the children in many ways. I have seen even gifted children at a mature age break down. Many of them would be leaving their homes for the first time. They have to reconcile themselves with several issues such as, a new place, new food habits, more than one new language (Latin, Syrian), no sufficient command over English, a rainy season that doesn't allow games, battling the limitations in one's own character and, for some, the fear and ailments that might be caused due to these changes and so on. In this situation, one has to play the role of an intelligent mother in their formation. Else, proper character formation would become impossible."

Not only did he preach, but he also practiced what he preached. Fr. Dunston was indeed a mother who cared for the aspirants. He paid attention to help and encourage those who struggled to learn Latin and Syrian. He had identified a method to easily master the conjugation of the verbs in Syrian language even as a scholastic. He explained this method to the aspirants. He consoled those who fell prey to the wrath of the other fathers teaching them. He motivated those who could not cope, and those who intended to leave the

Congregation just because they were lagging behind in their studies.

Those who fell sick in the seminary would receive special consideration from Fr. Dunston. He sat with them and nursed them back to health. He never allowed them to feel homesick, or lonely. He was careful to provide particular concern for those who needed it. They found solace in his loving embrace.

Gently and Firmly

As a religious formator, Fr. Dunston had keen observation. But it was not part of his habit to respond to each and every observation he had of the candidates. With the tender understanding of paternal generosity, he overlooked some of the weaknesses of the formees. He waited prudently for the opportune time to rectify them.

The role model for Fr. Dunston, in disciplining the candidates, was his own father. He gives an account of an incident that occurred in his childhood: "I was reluctant to go to school for the first few days after joining school. I did not go for one or two days. Dad, on learning of this, decided to take me to school himself. He acted quite diplomatically. Students older than me used to go to school through the path in front of my house. He called some of them and enquired of them as to why they hadn't taken me along to school earlier, and instructed them to take me along henceforth. He pretended as if I was very interested in going to school but didn't, only because they hadn't taken me with them. The children instantly caught the trick, and admitted their oversight. Since my pride was in no way hurt, I immediately put on the act of a very interested student. Though all of them spoke and acted in a supporting manner, I was conscious that

the mistake was actually mine. I didn't show it though. Since then, there was no need for any pressure on me in this matter." This childhood incident had a great impact on my later life'. It seems that he employed this strategy in dealing with the candidates too.

He responded to the various 'games and tricks' played by the candidates without hurting their egos. During personal conferences, if an aspirant pointed out the failures of another aspirant or of the community, Fr. Dunston would not probe into the matter to find the culprits or force the brother to divulge their names. He respected the secrecy. He waited patiently for them to reveal the information.

He seldom scolded the aspirants. He would correct them privately. Corrections in public was not his practice. He would not chastise them when he caught them speaking in a manner that was inappropriate to the place or time. Instead, he would walk away with a smile. That smile would suffice for the children to correct themselves.

It was not his habit to compel anyone to fulfill his responsibilities. He would merely point him towards the right path and counsel him to tread that way.

However, he had the courage to raise his voice against those who had crossed the limits of appropriate behavior. He took binding decisions regarding their vocation without showing any favoritism.

Emotional and Prudent

The priests and candidates of Devamatha Province used to go to the monastery on the banks of the Chalakudy river to bathe in the river. The aspirants from the aspirants' house at Elthuruth and Varandarappilly used to come for this

program together. As per this practice, in April 1962, the aspirants reached the monastery to bathe in the river. A few days thus went by in bathing and having fun. On 25 April, an incident took place which shook the community. Bro. E. L. Antony, an aspirant from the aspirants' house at Elthuruth was not to be seen at night. On further probing, it was understood that he drowned while bathing in the river. Their Rector, Fr. Samson, was not in station at that time. So, Fr. Dunston, the person responsible for the aspirants from Varandarappilly, had to take charge of the tragic incident. The mental agony that he suffered as a result of the tragedy, aggravated the eczema on his leg and blood oozed out. Even years later, when he recounted the experience, the depth of his pain was plain.

During the period 1959-60, Fr. Dunston was the Rector of aspirants at Varandarappilly. As part of the festal celebration, *kathāprasaṅgam* (lyrical narrative or story telling performance, a popular performing art in Kerala) was staged in front of the Church. It was sweetly melodious, and had an attractive storyline. The artist was describing the beauty of a young girl. The aspirants were present in the audience. Fr. Rector, sensing that the narration would not be appropriate for the aspirants, sent a person to call the aspirants to supper. He did not allow them to watch the performance after their supper. When they expressed their dissatisfaction, he consoled them. Though the aspirants did not take it well then, they understood it was for their own good at a later stage.

He focused on handling the 'adolescent problems' of the aspirants. He prepared them well to face these issues.

It was the time when Fr. Dunston was Rector of aspirants at Ranchi. A good Bengali film was playing in the nearby

Sandhya theatre. A famous actress was playing the role of a religious sister who was a social worker. The priests in the area had watched the film and recommended it. Fr. Rector then sent the aspirants for the evening show of the film the next day.

The children enjoyed the film. They could even understand the language because they did not find much difference between Hindi and Bengali. But, they did not see anyone playing the role of a religious sister in the movie. All they saw was a young lass dancing around with the hero. They assumed that she would later repent and become a religious sister, and waited for it to unfold. But, it did not. Instead, at the end of the movie, they watched her taking the hand of her longstanding heartthrob. Later, they came to know that the film they enjoyed was not Bengali but Hindi. The film they intended to watch was restricted to only the second shows from that day. The aspirants came back perturbed. Their loving Rector comforted them. He sent them the next day to watch the movie that had been intended for them.

Once when he found that the advice from the Confessor would derail the vocation of an aspirant, Fr. Dunston instructed that the Confessor be changed. Also, when he noticed that a particular aspirant's vocation would be in trouble, he paved the way for a change in the batch.

The novices and aspirants found a trustworthy spiritual director in Fr. Dunston. He did not attribute inordinate spiritual significance to anything. He maintained equanimity and was realistic in his counsel. Once during a session for the novices, Fr. Dunston spoke at length about the cry of Jesus on the cross. "Jesus cried, 'I thirst.' We should not interpret it, as many do, as a thirst for souls. It is quite natural for a man dying on the cross to have thirst and to cry out for water." He

continued, “Don’t take even the Bible to be absolute. Even a good novel or literature sometimes evokes the experience of the Eternal Truth.” A person testifies that this perspective of Fr. Dunston helped him ‘to look at theology, dogmas and rules in a more calm and objective way’.

Once when Fr. Dunston was handling a session for the novices, the novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, solemnly recited in most churches on Saturdays, came up for discussion. One of the songs contained a line as follows: ‘Mary, from thy sacred image, with those eyes look upon us...’ Fr. Dunston critiqued it saying, “Oh... Mary should look at us through those eyes alone... Hasn’t a spark of idolatry has crept into it?”

Paving the Way to the Streams of Grace

More than leading the formation as the Master in formation houses, Fr. Dunston preferred to remain in the background as the assistant to the formators. He believed that the assistants to formators have a specific role to play. The master in the formation house is the one appointed by God to play the pivotal role in the formation process of the candidate and to accompany them. He is the essential medium through which God helps the candidates to grow rooted in their vocation and to enthusiastically surge forward. He firmly believed that the pathways of divine grace that flow into the candidates to enrich their vocation, are their formation masters. Fr. Dunston took upon himself, as the assistant to the formation masters, the responsibility of bringing the candidates closer to these pathways of divine grace. He found satisfaction in accompanying the candidate along with their master to the Presence of the Divine Master. He maintained complete sincerity to his assignment.

Fr. Dunston was quite disinterested in the fulfillment of responsibilities. Just like any other person, he had his own likes and dislikes with regard to the candidates. However, in his personal relationship with them his own interests were never visible. It was not part of his style to keep close to himself those whom he liked. He did not show undue affinity to those who tried to remain close to him. He maintained complete disinterest in relationships even when his heart overflowed with love towards some people. He stood away from boisterous expressions of love. He kept superficial thoughts and emotions far away from him. Being partial was an unthinkable proposition for him.

When Body and Mind Became Weak

Fr. Dunston spent the last leg of his life in formation houses. He loved the candidates seamlessly. He loved to be with them.

Over-the-top expression of love was not a facet of his behaviour. He started expressing his love towards the children, albeit in a moderate manner, after his memory turned hazy and he was unable to control his brain. In 2000, he was leading a life of rest in Kozhinjampara. From his room in the ground floor he used to enjoy as music the sound from the first floor where the aspirants were in recreation. A smile would blossom on his lips at that time. He longed to go up and partake in the recreation with the aspirants. But, fearing he might fall, Fr. Rector had denied him permission to go up. Since he did not have permission to go up, he would stand near the staircase, point fingers upwards and express his love and happiness towards the aspirants.

If he could not find somebody in the community, he would go around searching for him as if something has befallen them. He would ask "Where are my children?"

“Where did the fathers go?” Since his memory was failing, the question would be repeated.

One day at Arul Malar Illam Novitiate in Saravanampatti, the novices were late to come down for lunch after their classes. Fr. Dunston felt quite bored sitting alone in his room in the ground floor. He tried to climb the stairs to reach up to the first floor where the classes were going on. He pushed the bystander who tried to stop him. He ran up saying enthusiastically, “I want to see my boys.” When he reached there the novice master asked him, “Why did you come here?” He replied, “I did not see my boys. I came in search of them.” Then he sat in the class and listened eagerly to the novice master like a novice.

As a formator the person of Fr. Dunston was a God-given gift. As a formator and as an assistant to the formators, he has made a venerable contribution in forming the candidates. His presence was considered a blessing by the formees. His presence induced a conducive atmosphere for the blossoming of the candidates. The formees trusted him and had no misgivings with him. He calmed those who were in misery with a divine perspective. He discerned their vocation and guided them in the right path. He comprehended the issues with clarity and gave necessary directions. He led them to divine perfection through a grace-filled Sacrament of Reconciliation. Those who received his loving formation and imbibed stable qualities from him, consider the time periods spent in formation under his tutelage as blessed opportunities. Even those who left the Congregation returned to seek his blessings. The memories that emanate from them were fresh with their deep sentiments of gratitude.

Chapter 14

A GRACE-FILLED CONFESSOR AND CARING COUNSELLOR

Ittooppunni made his first Confession after he was six-and-a-half-years-old. In those days, the practice of receiving Holy Communion immediately after the first Confession was not prevalent. The practice in vogue in those days was to receive Communion with due preparation after making a habit of Confession. Ittooppunni would go to Confession every week after his first one. He was granted permission to receive First Holy Communion only after he was seven-and-a-half-years old. Ittooppunni expresses his perception in this regard:

“I still remember telling myself, in those days, that it was illogical to block the reception of the Holy Communion. It was to make a proper Confession that you needed more knowledge. It was more difficult too. If that is done properly, receiving Communion is easy. You don’t need to do anything. One just needs to attain the age where one can recognize that Jesus lives in the normal bread. I had already learnt everything necessary to receive the first holy communion.”

Ittooppunni would approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation with much deference. It was an inspiration for him to keep away from a sinful life. God’s grace granted him a strong consciousness to keep away from words and deeds if he remembers that they are sinful enough to be confessed. He also took care to keep others from falling prey to sin by reminding them that their words or deeds are sinful and have

to be confessed. He had an impression that others would also have the same convictions about Confession as he did.

“I could not learn theology as I should have.” This was a persistent thought that worried Bro. Dunston. This worry evolved into grief as he was approaching his priestly ordination. He shared it with his superiors. They gave confidence to the deacon. Obediently, he prepared for his priestly ordination. He immersed himself in faithfully administering the Sacraments after his Ordination. Fr. Dunston considered it a holy act to sit in the Confessional and lead a penitent through the Sacrament of Reconciliation to a better relationship with God. For those who approached him, Fr. Dunston transformed them into an instrument of God’s grace that helped them bid adieu to their life of sinfulness, restore their relationship with God and to forge ahead in the path of God. When he saw many individuals returning from the Confessional with much consolation, he reached a conviction: “People expect a priest to be holy and not someone with profound erudition.”

Celina, a support staff at Carmel Convent, Saravanampatti, testifies: “I know Fr. Dunston from 1956. He would frequently come from the monastery at Varanadarappilly to the church in Pallikkunnu to hear Confessions. I was very young then. We would all go to him for confessing saying, ‘He is a very holy priest; he will give good advice.’ He would spend hours together in the Confessional on every first Thursdays and other special days. He would leave for the monastery only after hearing all our confessions, no matter how much time it took... When he sat for Confessions at Arul Malar Illam, Saravanampatti, I would go for confessions only to him. He would give me the necessary inputs to go about my kitchen duties without complaining. He would

encourage me by saying that cooking food and feeding people is the duty of Martha according to the gospels. This has helped me to be able to experience confidence in my abilities, and contentment in my job. Since then, I began to find happiness in cooking and feeding the convent community.

Sr. Onofriya CMC, remembers: "I have known Fr. Dunston from the time he was at Pakulam, Attappady. At that time, I was in the convent at Kottathara. Several youngsters from far off places would be working in the government offices such as, Kottathara Land Tribunal, Social Conservation and the like. Occasionally they would come to the convent and request us, 'Could you please invite that priest in brown habit for us? When we confess with him and share everything openly to him, we feel a heaviness removed from our minds. We are inspired to give up our sinful ways.'"

Many people testify that it is a great experience to confess and to receive spiritual advice from Fr. Dunston. Many experienced the confessional in which he sat as a holy place filled with God's grace. They saw in his patient and serene personality a spiritual father with knowledge and maturity. They received an ineffable peace from his saintly presence.

Fr. Dunston was the spiritual director and Confessor of a large number of people. He was the long-time Confessor of Mar Joseph Irimpen, bishop of Palakkad. The bishop spent the last few years in the priest home at Malampuzha. As he was nearing his end, he increasingly sought the presence of Fr. Dunston. As per his request, Fr. Dunston visited the Priest Home every week. By that time, Fr. Dunston himself was beginning to face problems related to loss of memory. It became a regular practice to forget the destination once he

boarded the bus. He struggled to remember his destination when the bus conductor approached him. Hence, the Superiors denied him permission to travel alone. The bishop was sad to miss the services of Fr. Dunston, a good Confessor.

Many were touched as they made their confession with Fr. Dunston. "Humbly place yourself under the strong protective arm of God. He will raise you at the right time." "Nothing will happen in life without the knowledge of the good Lord. Consider the Sisters as your siblings and serve them with love. See God's Will through them." These are some of his simple yet pragmatic pieces of advice that he relentlessly imparted. What he continuously lived, absorbed into the inner recesses of his mind, and integrated in his personality was articulated appropriately.

He was not in the habit of imparting advice by accusing the penitent. Instead, he would advise them with a simple smile trying to inspire their heart and mind, consoling, blessing and touching them with his warmth and tender love. That smile would be imbued with gentleness and an innocent joy.

Fr. Dunston was endowed with a special faculty to read the thoughts and feelings of the heart and soul. Many would ask with amazement, "How did father know my mind?" That ability to advise knowing the mind of the penitent is an experience that many remember about Fr. Dunston. He accepted and loved each individual the way they were, while warning them of the dangers in the path of spiritual life.

He paid special attention to the spiritual growth of those who regularly made their confessions to him. He considered their spiritual progress his responsibility. He would submit to his memory the challenges they discussed. Later he would

enquire on how they overcame them. He would enquire if they had followed the instructions he had given in the previous confession. Many speak with amazement about the fabulous memory that Fr. Dunston had in this regard.

If the need arose, he would immediately get into the Confessional even if he were very tired. Even when his memory was in total disarray, he would tell the Rev Sisters "Call me when you need." He meant to tell them to call him when they wanted to make confessions. Fr. Dunston was always prepared to spend any length of time for the spiritual growth of people. He rejoiced in the realisation of the special gift deposited in him by God.

Good Shepherd Seeking Out

Fr. Dunston considered hearing Confessions as his need. He went in search of those who could not come to him due to their tight schedules. Sr. Hermel from Vimal Jothi Hospital, Saravanampatti, says: "We have several experiences of his mercy when, seeing how busy we were at the hospital, he would patiently wait and seek us out. He had even come back to hear our confessions if he saw us involved in the hospital duties. He was a loving father who would patiently listen to my doubts, apprehensions and anxieties before providing appropriate guidance! He could read my mind even before I spoke. Even now I keep looking for a long time at the image we received when we attended his last rites. I seek his intercession regularly."

His very presence was very precious in the field of formation. The Superiors appointed him to regularly visit the formation houses in the province. The purpose of his visits was to give personal conferences to the candidates, provide courage and confidence in their vocation thus energize them

to move forward. He fulfilled his responsibility with exemplary sincerity. He always remembered the brothers who were doing their graduation or regency in various ashrams either alone or in groups. Their problems were the matter for his prayers. They were so deep in his consideration that he would go to meet the brothers even without being called. If those who sought his spiritual direction did not come to him for a considerable period of time, he would go in search of them. If he felt someone needed his spiritual guidance, he would go to them as a solace in their confusion regarding their vocation. He paid attention to leading the candidates, without interfering with the work of the Spirit in them, to help them grow in their vocation and in their relationship with God.

A Caring and Generous Heart

Many from among those who interacted with Fr. Dunston have experiences to share on his caring attitude. They testify that his behaviour was natural, free and honest.

One of them remembers: "As an aspirant, I once spent a long time with Fr. Dunston for spiritual direction. I went to sleep very late one night. He remembered this fact after breakfast the next day. Soon he called me and granted permission to sleep saying, 'Go and rest for a while. I shall call you when it is time for the class.'" Even though he forgot many things, he thoughtfully remembered certain things that concerned others.

Here is the experience of another brother: During his regency, he used to take the four-wheeler in the ashram and ride it. His purpose was to learn driving. One day, as he was using it, the vehicle incurred a small damage. The Superior took it up with the authorities. This caused heartache to the

brother. After three years, as the brother was waiting to make his perpetual profession, Fr. Dunston approached him and asked, "Has the vehicle issue been sorted out? Did you get permission for the final vows?"

Here is an experience of a brother who was doing regency at Little Flower Ashram, Coimbatore: He chose Fr. Dunston as his spiritual director, but was not attending the spiritual direction sessions for a long time. One day, Fr. Dunston came to the ashram to meet the brother. As the brother was preoccupied with certain duties, they could not meet. After waiting for a long time, Fr. Dunston asked him to accompany him to the bus stop. On the way they discussed his spiritual life. So intense was the zeal that Fr. Dunston had for souls.

Once a brother shared the many painful experiences in his life with Fr. Dunston. They did not have an opportunity to meet after that. After several months, Fr. Dunston called Fr. Provincial over the phone from Sacred Heart Ashram, Perinthalmanna. "When Your Paternity comes next week, kindly bring that brother. I want to meet him."

Accompanying Spiritual Guide

Sr. Lissy, niece of Fr. Dunston, shares her experiences: "I received the divine call to religious life after my father's demise. Many interpreted it to be the consequence of the grief due to my father's departure. Fr. Varghese Palathingal went to Little Flower College, Guruvayoor, where I was studying and informed Sisters that my religious inclination was only due to the grief of my father's demise and to let me continue my studies for two more years. I was worried. Fr. Dunston helped me to clear the hurdles in following my vocation by telling them that if I had a vocation, I should go right away.

“I was sent to do M.Sc. when I was a postulant. I was very worried. My batchmates had moved on. I would have to sit with my junior batch. I opened my concerns to him. He said, ‘The hearts of your friends have been filled with the oil of the love of God. Wait patiently till yours is filled.’ My misery was gone when I heard these words.

I did my M.Sc. in Keralavarma College. I was staying at the Mary Rani Convent near Amala Hospital, Thrissur. Those days I used to confess even my smallest mistakes to Fr. Dunston. After the first exam, I was very troubled due to the fear that I might fail. I couldn’t even study for the next exam. I sat in my room and cried. I didn’t open my room when Sisters knocked at the door. Somebody said, “Fr. Dunston has come.” I opened the door and there was Fr. Dunston standing in front of me. I shared my troubles with him. He said, “What is over is done and dusted. Surrender it to the Lord. Start preparing for the coming exam.” When he said so, all my sorrows and fears just melted away. We spoke for ten minutes. He came all the way from Coimbatore just to meet me. God showed my fears to him. So, he came in search of me. I came out trumps in the exam I feared I would fail.

“My novitiate formation was in Marthakkara. One day, when he came there to see me, he said, ‘I like David very much. I used to pray reading the Psalms. You too should read the Psalms. Read only the Bible and the *Imitation of Christ*. You will get everything you need from reading it.’ Then, he taught me two ejaculatory prayers: 1. Oh Sweet Heart of Jesus, be You my true Joy. 2. Oh Holy Spirit, abide with me and make me abide with You always. Later, too, he used to write about spiritual matters to me.

“When it was time to make my final vows, I desired to leave the Congregation, pray in solitude and lead a simpler life. I informed this to Fr. Dunston in a letter. He sent me a three-page reply. I read three lines from it. I understood it was a letter that was a deterrence to my project. I tore it off. Then, as instructed by my Confessor, I went with Bro. Savio to meet Mar Gratian Mundadan, Bishop of Bijnor. There the bishop showed me a letter and asked me to find out who wrote it. It was written by Fr. Dunston. It was written as follows in it: ‘I came to know that she is preparing for an adventure. It is not possible for me to come there to assist her. I request Your Paternity to talk to her and save her.’ Thus Fr. Dunston saved me from leaving the Congregation.

“Later when he met me, he said, ‘I too desire to lead a simpler life. Preserve this desire. I have not got an opportunity till now. I am speaking about it in the Provincial Synaxes. Keep discussing it. It will happen when the time is appropriate.’

Lastly, when I was staying at the Rehabilitation Centre at Varanasi (in 2003), I wrote a letter to Fr. Dunston. I wrote that I had nobody to guide me anymore. Tears welled up in my eyes when I wrote those words. When I returned after sending this letter, I received a call from my brother: ‘Fr. Dunston had a fall. His memory had faded. Now he was like a baby.’ My eyes were overflowing. I realised that our souls were so united that we were communicating at a different level, which was why I had started sobbing that I don’t have a guide anymore when, at a distance, Fr. Dunston had a fall.”

Dazzling Spark even in a Hazy Memory

Even in the last leg of life, when his memory was fading, the plain words and simple presence turned out to be spiritual

guidance to the candidates. They saw him as a saintly presence that spread a spiritual energy around him. His very presence brought about peace, calmness and joy to others. His being there was a catalyst for the community formation and spiritual progress of the candidates.

Fr. Dunston, who rejoiced in God, was always immersed in an intense quest for holiness! This quest continued without any disruption even when he neared his end and fell into a weakened state. The supreme love that welled up from within and started flowing from his infancy, continued to seamlessly flow out breaking the shackles of age-induced limitations, 'breaking open the spatio-temporal hurdles'. He prayed with tears in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Ejaculatory prayers flowed out from the fullness of the heart. He praised God in a loud voice, though his words were not clear and not logically connected. His prayers were a source of consolation and inspiration to others. It transformed into solace for the suffering, light for the confused, and courage for those who had misgivings about their own vocation.

A novice explains his experience: "It was the time for the examination of conscience at night. I was not able to do anything. Thoughts were tying me down. I was not able to even move. I felt my head was thickening... What do I do? I had no idea. Where would I get help from? Suddenly, in that silence, came a loud noise. 'O God, help... God, help... Father, one child... child... child... God, help...'" Fr. Dunston, who had very little consciousness left, was praying!" The novice continues: "I started praying along silently, 'God, help...' I have no words to express the peace that I experienced at that very moment.

A candidate, who was troubled by confusing thoughts about his vocation, once took up a turn to look after Fr. Dunston at night. As it meant losing sleep, he took up the duty without much enthusiasm. But Fr. Dunston slept quite well that night. By midnight, he called the candidate and told him, "You have received a great fortune. You should pray well." Then he continued reciting some ejaculatory prayers. The presence and prayers of Fr. Dunston gave him a lot of strength to move forward. He felt that the opportunity to stay all night with Fr. Dunston was a blessing. Whenever Fr. Dunston saw him, he would say, "Don't worry; just pray." His words were enough to instil courage and inspiration.

Chapter 15

THE SPIRITUALITY OF FORGETFULNESS AND SOME INTERESTING STORIES

Forgetfulness had affected Ittooppunni even when he was a child. He was afraid that forgetfulness along with his other limitations would hinder him in his studies and vocation. This frailty of memory, an integral part of his life, would remain with him until his death. He ultimately welcomed death, debilitated by forgetfulness.

Fr. Dunston accepted all sufferings and insults caused by forgetfulness with an ingenuous innocence and holy humility. He was able to transform all experiences as nourishment for growth in sanctity.

Self-Realized Mystic with Self-Acceptance

He was neverreluctant to accept that he was forgetful. He smiled at his limitations, quite aware of his weakness. He acknowledged it as his own. Others coming to know of this problem did not affect him in any way. On the other hand, he shared the stories of his forgetfulness with others without any difficulty. He humbly accepted help from others. Like a child, he asked around eager to know things. He obeyed their words in even small things. He participated in their banter with a delightful smile. He sought forgiveness when he failed. He was a person who knew himself thoroughly. He was a man of self-realization, conscious of his own weaknesses.

When Fr. Dunston was at Attappady, he offered Mass at the convent at Seenkara. He would walk to the convent daily.

Getting out of the ashram and reaching the main road, on some days, he would turn right instead of left and reach the gates of the convent at Kookkampalayam. Once there, he would realise what had happened. "I am mistaken. Shouldn't I be in the convent at Seenkara?" he would exclaim, turn back, reach the actual destination and offer Mass there. He would recount his mistake to the nuns while having breakfast there after Mass. Thus, his forgetfulness became a topic of entertainment.

Fr. Paul Kalluveetil was conducting St. Chavara retreats at CSR retreat centre at Pariyaram in 1994-95. One of the retreats was attended by Fr. Dunston. However, he arrived late by a day for the retreat. He might have confused the dates due to forgetfulness. Consequently, as soon as he reached the retreat centre, he went in person to meet the retreat preacher and begged his forgiveness. Later, he got the notes for the sessions he could not attend, and wrote them down.

In 1989, the jubilee of his religious profession was celebrated at Pavaratty, the place from where Fr. Dunston hailed. Fr. George Nereparambil, his erstwhile disciple, was in charge of the chapel in the monastery there. The disciple knew his master well and they enjoyed a good camaraderie. Hence, the disciple reminded Fr Dunston, "We have a formal meeting after the Jubilee Mass. At the end of it, you are supposed to give a response." "Shall I write out the speech for you?" the disciple offered. Fr. Dunston accepted in all humility the offered assistance. He delivered the short speech that was written by the disciple. And, after the speech, he added, "Things are not as they seem. I have a few shortcomings. Do pray that I may overcome them and have a peaceful death." The holy religious lived till his death with much self-awareness.

Except God and Brothers...

The absentmindedness of Fr. Dunston was not always about forgetfulness. It had to do with the priority that he gave to his faith in God. The conviction that God was most important and that his vocation was to become a saint was set deep within. He yearned to be immersed in God all the time. As he was totally engrossed in these thoughts, other things just faded from his mind and memory. He forgot anything that did not aid him in elevating the quality of his religious life or in fulfilling his responsibilities. His mind was filled with thoughts on God and concern for the other. He never failed to remember even the minute details of the personal or familial aspects of the candidates entrusted to his formation. His personal conferences with the aspirants went on for long durations, forgetting even his meals. He maintained a surprisingly miraculous memory regarding the needs and challenges of those who approached him for Confession or Spiritual direction.

Sleeping and Forgetting

Fr. Dunston would doze off during the private conferences with the aspirants. He would resume his conversation with a smile when he woke up. This is an incident during his tenure as Rector at Aspirant House at Ranchi, Bihar: One evening, an aspirant came to Fr. Dunston's room seeking spiritual direction. Midway through their conversation, the power supply went off. As they continued talking, they did not deem it necessary to light any lamp. Expecting the power to resume, they continued their conversation. When it was time for supper, other aspirants went to call them. There they saw both the master and the disciple asleep. The incident became a butt of jokes for all.

He would set out to travel from the ashram. Midway to his destination, he would forget something and return. Since the aspirants knew that Fr. Rector was invariably bound to forget something, and return to collect it, they would, before he set out on any journey, hand over to him a to-do list. He would keep it safely in his pocket. Despite this, he would return from the journey, having forgotten some items from the list, the reason for this oversight being the fact that he forgot he was carrying a list!

The novices from Ambazhakkad novitiate once went for a walk. Fr. Dunston was waiting at the bus shed. They greeted him with a cheerful 'hello,' and walked past him. On their way back, they found him still waiting there. "Father, did you not board the bus?" they enquired. He replied with a smile, "I boarded the bus. Only then did I notice that I didn't have the bus fare."

Burning Candle Turns into a Sprinkler

It was the time of the night examination of conscience at the novitiate at Saravanampatti. As the power was off, the prayer session was being conducted in the light of the candle. Usually after a brief moment of silence, Fr. Rector would start the concluding prayer and bless everyone present with holy water. Other priests were not in station. Fr. Dunston, who was leading the prayers, dozed off. None of the novices dare wake him up in person. One novice knocked on the bench to wake him up. Fr. Dunston woke up suddenly. Assuming it was time to bless the novices with holy water, he took hold of the burning candle and imagining it to be the sprinkler, started sprinkling it on them. "Aww!" one of the novices exclaimed loudly wincing at the heat of the melted wax sprinkled on his skin. The community exploded in laughter.

Forgetful of Oneself

Oftentimes Fr. Dunston forgot to take food or bathe. Only when he felt hunger or thirst would he remember that he had not eaten or drunk water. Fr. Clemens Thottungal, Provincial, had arranged a few aspirants to remind him and feed him at the determined time when he was Rector of aspirants at Varandarappilly.

1989-90 was his jubilee year. Preparations were on at Little Flower Minor Seminary, Saibabacolony, where he was a member, for a simple celebration. The invitees – Fathers from the nearby CMI houses and Sisters from the nearby convents – arrived in time. But the jubilarian was not to be found. He had not returned from Pavaratty. When it was unduly late, they enquired over phone. He had not yet started from Pavaratty. He had forgotten all about the celebrations. The guests partook of the jubilee meal in the jubilarian's absence and returned disappointed and a little chagrined.

“Is Fr. Dunston there?” Fr. Joy Kolengaden, from the Provincial house, once enquired over the phone to the person who picked the phone at the Aspirants' house at Kaundampalayam. “Let me see,” the person replied and went up to the first floor to seek Fr. Dunston. After some time, the same person returned to the phone booth and answered, “Ah... I myself am Fr. Dunston.”

A Not-So-Happy Incident

In the midst of these interesting episodes depicting his forgetfulness, we need to also look into a not-so-happy incident too. Fr. Thomas Ambooken shares his experience: “During the exams three months after I arrived at the minor seminary at Varandarappilly there was a trunk call from my

uncle. It was to inform me about the demise of his eldest daughter (my dear cousin Jolly, around 20 years of age). Fr. Rector decided to wait till the exam got over to inform me of the call. But he forgot all about it. Consequently, I didn't learn of her death until I received a letter from home after a week. Fr. Rector, as was customary, read the letter. It was then that the poor Fr. Rector remembered that he had failed to inform me of my cousin's death. The letter was replete with grief and regret that I had not gone home. With the open letter in his hand, and tears flowing from his eyes, Fr. Rector ran to me and said, "Brother, I have committed an unpardonable mistake." Tears were pouring out profusely. I read the letter and wept. Fr. Rector took me to his room and tried to console me for a long time. The same day arrangements were made to take me home and the information was given to the community. Though the incident caused me pain at that moment, when I came to know Fr. Dunston closely, my love and respect towards him grew manifold."

Chapter 16

A FLOWER BLOSSOMS IN HEAVEN

In his last days, Fr. Dunston led a life of rest at Arul Malar Illam, Saravanampatti, St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara and Little Flower Minor Seminary, Kaundampalayam, accepting the ministrations of Fathers and brothers. As the bystander for three years, Mr. Ganesan was his close aide. When they served this holy religious, their hearts welled with sheer love.

From 2002 Fr. Dunston was the member of Arul Malar Illam, Saravanampatti. The novitiate formation was shifted to Velamthavalam in 2006. As the construction was not complete, it was decided to take Fr. Dunston to Little Flower Minor Seminary, Kaundampalayam. Thus, he began to stay at the aspirants' house at Kaundampalayam.

As days passed by, he became increasingly weak. His consultation was with Vimal Jothi Hospital-Saravanampatti. His treatment was continued with occasional hospital stays and frequent visits to the doctor. By 8.45 pm on 17 September 2006, Fr. Dunston experienced dizziness and soon fell unconscious. This had continued for few months by then. He was taken to Vimal Jothi Hospital and then was shifted to Ramakrishna Hospital for better treatment on 19 September. He stayed there two days for treatment. From then on, routine consultation was shifted to Ramakrishna Hospital. On 19 October, his routine check-up was done there. Doctor advised him to continue the medicines he was taking.

It was decided to celebrate 'community day' on 21 October for the aspirants. Preparations for the celebration had started

from the beginning of the month. Aspirants were preparing for the event at the Preshitha Nilayam auditorium late evening on 19 October. Fr. Dunston was with them. By 9.30 pm, he fainted and fell unconscious. Fr. Sabu Pallai and Mr. Joseph took him to Ramakrishna Hospital. After he was examined by the doctor on duty, he was shifted to the room.

At around 11 pm, Fr. Dunston appeared to be breathing his last. He grabbed the hands of his bystander. *I'm dead... I'm going... I'm happy... Help me... Save me, Jesus...*," he kept repeating. His caretaker chanted the name of Jesus in his ears and prepared him for death.

By 2 am he was gasping for breath. Immediately, he was moved to the intensive care unit. The hospital authorities informed through the caretaker that Fr. Dunston's end was imminent. Fr. Francis Kizhakkumthala, Provincial and Fr. Raphael Kannanaickal, Prefect came over from the Provincial house. Fr. Provincial administered the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick to Fr. Dunston in the presence of Fr. Raphael, Fr. Sabu Pallai, Fr. Poly Payyappilly and Bro. Alex Thannippara. By 4.05 am on 20 October 2006, as he was nearing his 86th birthday, Fr. Dunston bid adieu to the world and went to receive his heavenly reward. A death quite peaceful and pleasant! Thus, the curtains on the long pilgrimage to holiness came down! The saintly life reached its most effective culmination!

After completing the hospital formalities, the body was taken back to Little Flower Minor Seminary-Kaundampalayam. Sr. Sidhi and Sr. Vimala came from Vimal Jothi Hospital to prepare the body and placed in the decorated coffin. The body was kept for public viewing in the seminary

chapel. People who knew him visited and prayed through the day.

The mortal remains were taken to Bharathamatha Monastery the next day (21 October) for the last rites. The funeral started at 10.45 am at the Bharathamatha Chapel. Mar Jacob Manathodath, Bishop of Palakkad, was the main celebrant. Fr. Justin Koipuram, General Councillor, Fr. Francis Kizhakkumthala, Provincial, Fr. Lucius Nereparambil, Provincial Councillor-Devamatha Province and Fr. John Maria Vianney, nephew of the deceased, were the concelebrants. Bro. Savio MMB, Fr. Dunston's nephew, several CMI confreres from Coimbatore, Thrissur and Sagar provinces, diocesan priests, religious sisters, relatives and people from various walks of life took part in the sacred rituals. Fr. Hadrian Ambooken preached the homily. The mortal remains were laid to rest in the newly constructed cemetery in the monastery premises.

Every one who heard of the unfortunate news of his demise exclaimed: "A saint has died!" The realization that such a person was no longer with them dawned gradually upon those who had some association with Fr. Dunston. Just as a withering flower leaves a trail of fragrance, Fr. Dunston continues to fill the void of his absence with the fragrance of a life lived in utmost devotion to God and in zealous accompaniment of those who came to him for confession and help! Fr. Dunston of holy memories!

Appendix

MILESTONES IN THE LIFE OF FATHER DUNSTON OLAKKENGAL CMI

27 November 1920	Birth
22 September 1935	Entered Aspirancy at St. Thomas Monastery, Pavaratty
20 July 1938	Novitiate Entrance at Little Flower Novitiate, Ambazhakkad
23 November 1938	Received Religious Habit
24 November 1939	First Profession of Vows
4 January 1941	Formation after Novitiate at St. Joseph's Monastery, Koonammavu
24 November 1942	Perpetual Profession of Vows
31 May 1947	Priestly Ordination
2 June 1947	Offered First Holy Eucharist at St. Thomas Monastery, Pavaratty
3 June 1947	Assistant Vicar at Sacred Heart Monastery, Chethipuzha
1 January 1948	Member at St. James Monastery, Karikkattoor
1 October 1948	Assistant Vicar at Lourdes Carmel Ashram, Ayiroor
1953	Procurator at St. Teresa's Monastery, Ambazhakkad
May 1956	Rector at St. Pius X Aspirant House, Varandarappilly

21 February 1965	Rector at St. Berchman's Aspirant House, Elthuruth
6 June 1967	Rector at St. Pius X Aspirant House, Varandarappilly
4 June 1969	Prior at Immaculate Heart Monastery, Varandarappilly
11 February 1972	Prefect at Devamatha Provincial House, Thrissur
11 May 1973	Superior at St. Joseph Home, Attappady
6 July to 2 October 1974	Vicar at Holy Trinity Church, Thavalam and St. Peter's Church, Jellippara
25 June 1977	Rector at Jothi Nivas, Ranchi
7 May 1978	Prior at Immaculate Heart Monastery, Varandarappilly
22 June 1978	Informed His Consent to Join Preshitha Vice-Province, Coimbatore
13 June 1979	Prefect at St. Antony's Ashram, Saravanampatti
20 September 1979	Member at Little Flower Novitiate, Ambazhakkad
5 August 1982	Rector at Preshitha College (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
May 1984	Member at Preshitha College (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
1986	Rector at St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara
26 October 1987	Member at Preshitha College (Novitiate), Saravanampatti

1988	Member at Little Flower Mission Centre, Coimbatore Rector at CMI Bhavan, Palakkad Member at Little Flower Minor Seminary, Saibaba Colony
1989	Simple Life at Chennimalai Simple Life at Kulakkattukurissi
1990	Member at Sacred Heart Ashram, Perinthalmanna
6 May 1991	Animator of CMI Brothers' Unit at St. Paul's House, Kadalundi
20 May 1993	Member at Arul Malar Illam (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
4 May 1994	Rector at Little Flower Minor Seminary, Kaundampalayam
May 1996	Member at Arul Malar Illam (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
30 June 1997	Member at St. Teresa's Monastery, Ambazhakkad
5 May 2000	Member at Bharathamatha Ashram, Palakkad
2000	Member at St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara
14 November 2002	Member at Arul Malar Illam (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
26 June 2006	Member at Little Flower Minor Seminary, Kaundampalayam
20 October 2006	Death



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