





**TRUTH BLOSSOMS IN LOVE**  
**A Biography of Fr. Dunstan Olakkengil**

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# **TRUTH BLOSSOMS IN LOVE**

**English Translation of *Sutharyam Sundaram*  
(Malayalam; Third Edition)**

**Poly Payyappilly CMI**

Translation

**Francis Xavier Vellanikkaran CMI**

2024

**Dharmaram Publications**

Bengaluru 560029 India

***Truth Blossoms in Love***

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 Dunstan Olakkengil 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 not very attractive, 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 Dunstan, 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 Dunstan's personal sanctity and credibility in religious commitment.

When we experience paucity of such simple but tall examples, retelling the life of Father Dunstan 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 Dunstan, it was indeed not an easy task; yet, being one of Father Dunstan's beloved disciples, Fr. Poly took up this challenging task and completed the work with utmost care and truthfulness. Those who have known Father Dunstan 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 with clarity and elegance. In addition, the literary style is simple but graceful; it is an easily readable text and, in its pages, Father Dunstan 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 Dunstan 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 the second edition of English translation (in fact, it is the translation of the third edition of *Sutharyam Sundaram* by Fr. Poly Payyappilly). Having known Father Dunstan as a young boy, Fr. Francis Xavier grew up into a young religious in his company and association; it is his appreciation for this saintly soul that clearly stands out in this translation. He wrote on Father

Dunstan: “No one ever would question his saintliness or 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. Dunstan Olakkengil 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. Dunstan 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 Dunstan himself. Indeed, in the words of Fr. Francis Xavier, 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 the second edition of *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 Dunstan, 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 Dunstan known far and wide. Let it also promote and proclaim the saintly life of Father Dunstan 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. Dunstan's life remains an inspiration to many in their pilgrimage of life, 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. Dunstan undoubtedly a model religious priest for the present generations.

Coimbatore  
30 November 2024

**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. Dunstan! 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 or 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 of this translation 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. Dunstan, 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 Vellanikkaran CMI**

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

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

In the period 1953-56, when Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan to pen down his memoirs. Abiding by the instruction of his spiritual director, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 Moilan.

After publishing the second edition, we were able to collect even more documents related to Fr. Dunstan. I was confident that these new findings will make the third edition even more authoritative. During this interim period, a few other books on Fr. Dunstan were published. Among them, W. J. Tharayil's *Dheerghadharshi Dunstanachan* (Fr. Dunstan: A Prophet), Fr. George Nereparambil's *Dunstanachanekkurichu...* (About Fr. Dunstan), and *Ullazhaghu* (Inner Beauty) compiled by Frs. Johnson Valiyakulathil and Paul Thekkiniyath have enhanced this third edition.

A few additions and revisions have been made in the third edition of the book, taking cues from the contents of these books; some texts are included as they are, while others are summarized, adding more strength to this edition. Over the last three years, several memorial meetings and discussions about Fr. Dunstan were organized on various occasions in different places. The sharings that took place during these events have also contributed to enrich this text.

The third edition of *Sutharyam Suntharam* is only a phase in our exploration of the saintly soul of Fr. Dunstan. Research and study need to continue further.



Fr. Saju Chackalackal CMI, Provincial of Preshitha Province, initiated the publication of the second edition of the English translation; he has also offered a pertinent Foreword to this edition. Mr. David Smriti has designed the cover, and Viani Printings, Kochi, has beautifully completed the printing of the book.

May God bless everyone abundantly through Fr. Dunstan!

**Fr. Poly Payyappilly CMI**



## Chapter 1

### **FATHER DUNSTAN OLAKKENGIL CMI: A LIFE SKETCH**

Fr. Dunstan Olakkengil was born to the couple Paulose and Mariyam as the fourth among their six children. They belonged to the Olakkengil 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. His paternal grandfather was the namesake.

“From as early as I can remember, we had a spiritual atmosphere in our family. “This is how Fr. Dunstan recalls his family situation. Even before his birth, on 4 July 1919 to be precise, the Olakkengil 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.

From an early age of four and half, Ittooppunni started his elementary education at St. Mary’s Elementary School, Puthumanasserry, where his father was the Manager. He

continued his education at St. Joseph's High School, attached to St. Thomas Monastery, Pavaratty.

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. By the end of the retreat, he made his first confession to Fr. John Porathur, the parish priest at St. Joseph's Church, Pavaratty. He made it a habit to confess every week without fail. 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. Dunstan used to remember the anniversary of his First Holy Communion on this day.

While still in High School, Ittooppunni, on 22 September 1935, entered St. Berchmans' Aspirant House, attached to St. Thomas Monastery in Pavaratty. After successfully completing his high school education, he was sent to learn Latin and Syrian languages. The language studies that he started on 25 July 1937 at St. Theresa of Child Jesus Aspirant House, appended to St. Antony's Monastery in Aluva, was for one year. Fr. Cornelius, the Prior of the monastery, was the formator.

His novitiate entrance was on 20 July 1938. His novitiate formation was at the Little Flower Novitiate, which was a part of St. Teresa's Monastery in Ambazhakkad. Fr. Ludvic Kunianthodath was his novice master.

His 'holy sister Kunjhethi', the first-born in his family, entered her heavenly abode on 26 July 1938. In the same year, on 23 November, Fr. Dunstan received the religious habit, whereafter he assumed the name Bro. Dunstan of the Holy Family. He made his first profession and commenced his life of religious commitment on 24 November 1939.

St. Joseph's Monastery, Koonammavu was the location for his next stage of formation. Reaching Koonammavu on 4 January 1941, he learnt rhetoric. Latin and Syriac language studies also were part of his formation. Fr. Arsenius Parackal trained the candidates during this time.

After a year, on 05 January 1942 to be precise, he embarked on his philosophical studies at St. John of the Cross Monastery, Mutholy. Fr. Benjamin Kottooran was his Master there. He made his perpetual profession on 24 November 1942. On 22 November 1942, Bro. Dunstan's father was called for his eternal rest. It was during this period that Bro. Dunstan received his minor orders (preparatory, first and second) on 19 June 1943.

His theological studies were at the Sacred Heart Scholasticate attached to Sacred Heart Monastery, Chethipuzha. During his theological training that began on 6 January 1944, he was ably guided by Fr. Scaria Naduvileparambil, Fr. Vincent Alappatt (from January 1943), Fr. Celestine (from August 1944) Fr. Benjamin Kottooran (from April 1947). Fr. Placid Podippara - known as the preceptor of preceptors *gurukkanmaarute gurunaathan* - and Servant of God Fr. Canisius Thekkekkara were teaching theology in the same seminary. In this period, Bro. Dunstan received the rest of the minor orders: third and

fourth on 3 June 1944, fifth on 26 May 1945 and the sixth on 15 June 1946.

He received his Holy Orders on 31 May 1947. With the imposition of hands by Bishop Mar James Kalasserry Dn. Dunstan was raised to the Ministerial Priesthood at the monastery chapel at Chethipuzha. Subsequently, on 2 June Fr. Dunstan offered his first Holy Mass at the monastery chapel in Pavaratty.

Returning to Chethipuzha monastery on 7 June, after concluding the celebrations, Fr. Dunstan continued his theological studies.

The centre for Catechism at Chethipuzha monastery was quite extensive from its inception. Scholastics doing their theology were teaching Catechism there. Fr. Dunstan was appointed to assist the Prior in coordinating the Catechism classes there.

Fr. Dunstan completed his priestly formation by the end of the year 1947. His first appointment was at St. James Monastery, Karikkattoor. He joined as a member of the monastery on 20 December. He was primarily involved in catering to the spiritual needs of the Catholic faithful around the ashram.

After more than 8-month long ministry at Karikkattoor, he returned to Chethipuzha on 29 August 1948. During that period, Lourde Carmel Ashram at Ayiroor functioned as a subsidiary house of the Chethipuzha Monastery. A parish was established there in 1926 for the faithful who were reunified with the Catholic Church. Fr. Dunstan frequently visited this house and helped in its apostolates. From 17 October 1949 he began to stay there regularly. However, we

can see that he partook in the local council at the Chethipuzha monastery. It was in the council held on 23 February 1950 that he took part for the last time. The next local council was held on 18 March. So, we can reasonably guess that in this recess between two local councils, the house at Ayiroor was raised to the status of an independent house.

His beloved mother left for her heavenly abode on 9 June 1950. Having been given the responsibility of the parish attached to the ashram - since 31 August 1950 - he committed himself in right earnest to pastoral ministry.

The CMI Congregation was divided into three provinces in 1953 and Fr. Dunstan was part of Devamatha Province, Thrissur. On 22 June 1978, Fr. Dunstan 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, Ambazhakkadand 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 Aspirants' House, 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 Brothers' unit of the CMI Congregation was formed with its base at St. Paul's House, Kadalundi, Fr. Dunstan was appointed as their Spiritual Director. He fulfilled the aforementioned responsibility staying at St. Elias Monastery, Niravilpuzha, during 1991-92 and at St. Paul's House during 1992-93.

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 Olakkengil 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 Olakkengil 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 the Diocese of Palakkad, Bro. Savio in MMB Congregation while Sr. Licy in FCC Congregation. The younger sister of Fr. Dunstan served in the SH Congregation assuming the name Sr. Mary Marcene. Fr. Dunstan, a member of the Archdiocese of Thrissur, and Fr. Linston, a member of CMI Devamatha Province, Thrissur, are from the Olakkengil family.

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan.

A person known for his forgetfulness, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan went back in years and became Ittooppunni when he reminisced about his sister. He cried, laughed and smiled at the thought of her.

### **Patriotism, the 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan:

"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 set the background for an apt milieu for the dreams of God to thrive in their children. Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 Olakkengil 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 Alway. 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 (see 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. Dunstan:

“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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 were 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. Dunstan compares the inability of his mind to forgive to the sea waves. The sea roars at a distance. The waves rise high and gradually diminish in their intensity as they reach 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan, 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 the Prior at Varandarapilly, some parishioners happened to hurt Fr. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan.

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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. And so, he waited till the game was over. After the game, Fr. Dunstan 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 is 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan." Immediately, Fr. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan, the aspirant went in person to Fr. Zachaeus' room, sought his pardon thus resolving the issue. He witnesses that he could never forget the love and concern that Fr. Dunstan showed him on the day.

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan in their lives.

## Chapter 5

### AN ETERNAL PILGRIM IN THE PATH OF TRUTH

The underlying trait in the remarkable personality of Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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 love of truth made Fr. Dunstan humbler. Fr. Dunstan took over as the formator of aspirants at Ranchi after being away from the ministry of formation for many years. He humbly told the aspirants upfront: "I have come here more to learn some things from you rather than giving formation to you."

As he completed one year as novice master at Saravanampatti, he shared with the novices his own apprehensions about his methods of formation: "I have very less in me to give to the novices. Did I succeed in giving

even that little to you? I doubt if I have delivered the little that I am capable of?"

Once, Fr. Dunstan was walking towards the Saravanampatti novitiate house after alighting from the bus a little farther than usual. Those who saw him asked, "Father, why are you walking so far? Did you forget the place?" "I am returning after hearing the confession of the bishop. When we hear the confession of big people, we might feel proud that we are even greater than them. I'm walking to keep this pride away. We need to keep doing such small penances."

It is quite opportune to note the advice Fr. Dunstan gave to his sister Kochuthresia in a letter: "When we see someone who is suffering more than us, we find our sufferings as nothing. It is better to focus on those who are less privileged than us with regard to earthly provisions. However, we can avoid falling prey to pride if we focus on those who are quite higher than us in their love for God and in leading a virtuous life. It would show us how unworthy we are and motivate us to put in more strenuous efforts. Remember God our Father who grants us such situations at all times and continue to give thanks to Him."

The humble Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan was compelled to deliver a speech while he was at Chethipuzha in 1943; and, he presented a well-prepared speech on the topic ‘Love of Truth’.

He explains: “The whole of my life of virtue is a ‘love of 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. Dunstan.

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. Dunstan in his own words:

“St. Thomas More was very calculative in accordance with the words of our Lord. ‘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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 cause 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan was a personification of these virtues and ideals.

### **‘Logic’ and ‘Principle’**

‘Logic’ (*nyayam*) is a word that Fr. Dunstan used profusely. For him, logic was nothing but truth. ‘Principle’ (*thathvam*)

was another term that had profusely employed in his conversations.

### **The Witness of the Unfinished House**

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan came to know of it, he said, “We don’t need this business.” “We may have to stop the work.” Fr. Raphael responded, to which Fr. Dunstan quipped: “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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan. Being honest, Fr. Dunstan 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.

### **A Serene Ocean of Equanimity**

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. As per their request, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 Manethodath, the bishop of Palakkad, declared during the funeral ceremony of Fr. Dunstan, "As we pray in the Communion Service of the Holy Eucharist, Fr. Dunstan was a religious priest who lived with a 'cheerful face and pure heart'."

The inner strength of the personality of Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 straight-

forward, actions that were consistent with his words, speaking to the point, and 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 on 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan a drink. Fr. Dunstan refused. Soon, the request turned into a compulsion. Fr. Dunstan exploded saying, "You may drink. I have not said anything against it. Why should you compel others?"

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan 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.

The impassivity that is usually seen in the people with different ideas and principles was not seen in Fr. Dunstan. He would hold on to his convictions and argue vehemently for it in official meetings; however, once it is over, he would freely interact with them in a loving manner. Probably, this is what endeared him and made even those who opposed the ideas of Fr. Dunstan honour him wholeheartedly.

### **Imprinting the Love of Truth in the Formees**

As a person involved in formation for a very long time, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. He urged the aspirants to translate the letters by the saint when he was at Ranchi. He told them: "Some letters of Thomas More, which I translated to Malayalam, are lying in the bottom of my box for years now. We need to collect the rest and translate them too."

The candidates enjoyed a freedom to confide anything in Fr. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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.

Let us see the experience of a studious aspirant. Though his family was financially sound he did not have a conducive atmosphere for his studies. So, his plan was to join the seminary, study the course he liked and then leave. It was when he was cleverly covering up his instincts and living the life of an 'ideal seminarian' that Fr. Dunstan was

appointed as the Rector in the seminary. As the aspirant came to know his guru, he gradually felt a deep sense of remorse. He unburdened himself freely to his Rector. His father also felt the prick of conscience. He sought forgiveness from Fr. Dunstan through a letter (post). He was prepared to pay up a considerable amount for letting his son stay in the seminary.

Fr. Dunstan told the aspirant and his father who tried to mitigate his guilt by paying money: "Don't bother about the money. You have learnt a lot of good things in your seminary life. So, use them to live a good Catholic life. When you are placed well in your life, if possible, try to live with your family in some mission area. Then, you will be able to bear witness to Catholic faith."

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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 T.O.R. seminary. Fr. Rector came to know about it. He corrected them reminding them that it was unjust. Plucking guavas without the gardener's knowledge is a mistake. Giving that guava to the T.O.R. brothers and making them part of the mistake is another big mistake. 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. Dunstan 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 Aspirants' House 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan bore much fruit: "Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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.”

Fr. Dunstan wanted to have handed down to the ensuing generations devotional practices such as Consecration to the Sacred Heart. The following is the advice given in a letter to Stanislaus (his nephew) as he was preparing for house warming of his newly built house: “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.”

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. Dunstan 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 the removal of 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 exactly as learnt from a book. One day I did not receive Communion as I could not complete the prayer in time. I received Communion only after a very long time. Dad observed this. On reaching home, he told me that I need to recite the prayers in the book only when time permitted. I exercised 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. 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 sakhyam*). 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 a Path Unknown to His Mother**

“My mother continued to compel me to learn to assist at the altar from the age of six up until I was fourteen. But 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 even

to him, 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 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 asking 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 on his aim 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 10 pm, Fr. Dunstan told him, “Now, you may retire to bed. I am not done with my spiritual reading for today.” Father followed his religious discipline even while travelling! Brother was quite surprised.

### **Inviolable Spirit Even in Senescence**

What should be the attitude towards prayer when the body and mind does not support orderly prayer due to senescence-related ailments and weaknesses? How to pray? Fr. Dunstan explains in his letter to his ailing mother: "Raising our eyes towards God for help and calling out 'O God!' itself is a great prayer. God isn't looking upon the mere sound that comes out of one's mouth. It is our heart that God values. The very desire to love God is something that appeases God. 'God, grant me the grace to die loving You perfectly!' Dear mother, this is my heartfelt prayer. I believe you can also make this prayer easily. If you are not able to make other prayers, there is nothing to worry. This ejaculatory prayer encompasses all other prayers."

Years later, the son, too, was affected by senescence. Memories were engulfed by amnesia. Yet, the undercurrent of prayerfulness was flowing ceaselessly.

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. Dunstan 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.

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.

The novices used to remain in his room to assist Fr. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan kneeling at the altar and praying, "Lord, save me! Lord, save me!"

Once in the middle of the night, a novice woke up and found Fr. Dunstan praying in front of the statue of St. Chavara outside the chapel. "Father, who is this?" asked the novice, to which, Fr. Dunstan quipped: "We studied together; we are friends." Even when his memory failed him, even though he was not able to clearly understand the person, Fr. Dunstan nurtured an intimacy with St. Chavara.

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

## Chapter 7

# CONSTANT COMPANIONSHIP WITH THE INDWELLING GOD

The body is the temple of God (1Cor 6:19). God, who dwells in the human soul as the divine guest, is known as *antaryaami* or the Indwelling Presence. The Triune God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – resides in our soul. God bides in our soul, as the Soul of the soul, as the *Paramatma* within the *jivatma*. The call of every human being is to live in the constant remembrance of God, fixing the mind on His Indwelling Presence.

### **Human Heart: A Temple of the Lord**

“God is with you. Each one of us should become God’s permanent residences.” These are the words of Fr. Dunstan. In the letters he sent to his sister, Kochuthresia, and in his prayers, we see his exhortations regarding the indwelling Presence of God in human soul and the need to maintain the holiness of human body which is His temple:

Fr. Dunstan prays: “Lord, King of love, You, who strongly desires to live in human hearts, transform my heart into Your living tent and exalted temple and stay in it always.” “Lord, let me be like the monstrance, which is Your throne. Let my soul be Your beauteous residence.”

Fr. Dunstan laments that even though Jesus chose his soul as His dwelling place, he failed to maintain the holiness that the Lord’s dwelling place entails. Just as a besmirched monstrance obstructs a clear view of the Blessed Sacrament, he acknowledges that the stains within hindered him from

manifesting Jesus clearly to others. He also resolves to remove the dirt and make the monstrance radiant:

“You chose me to be a charming dwelling place and a vehicle for You to reach out to others. But I lived all these days like a patina-formed monstrance with a dirt-stained glass. You resided in me and yet no one could see Your Presence in me. I will cleanse and make this monstrance so gleaming that people can see Your Presence without any difficulty. I will restructure my life and behaviour. Help me in doing so. I crave to behave in the exact same way as You would if You were in my position.”

Subsequently, he enjoins his sister on how the body – the Temple of God – becomes contaminated and how it can be purged: “Our body is God’s Temple. We should respect it. Do not contaminate God’s Temple. God’s house is a place of prayer. Do not allow anything impure to enter inside. What can contaminate enters through the eyes, ears and such sense organs, which are like the windows and doors. So, safeguard the five sense organs. Do not allow entry to anything that God does not wish. If anyone has entered, the best way to destroy them is to forget them. They live in our memory. Hence, do not think or remember; forget them completely...”

Just as your body is God’s Temple, others, too, are the temples of the living God. This calls for a deep respect towards all individuals. Fr. Dunstan says: “See God in others too. When we greet the priests and elders saying ‘Praise be to Jesus Christ’, we are, in fact, praising God Who is present in them. God is certainly present in the babies who have received baptism. When you carry little Jose Paul (Brother’s son), I want you to remember this...”



Similar ideas can be seen in his letter to Stanislaus too: "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 new-born is the perfect temple of God now. When you kiss the darling babe remember the indwelling God."

### ***Īśāvāsyamidam Sarvaṃ***

'*īśāvāsyamidam sarvaṃ*' (Isha 1:1), says the *Īśā Upanishad*. It means that God finds abode within everything. God dwells in everything as the life force within. His indwelling is the basis for the existence of everything. Fr. Dunstan writes: We believe that God is everywhere. His omnipotent power is at work always and within all creatures. If it were not (if God's Power was removed from any creature), that creature would return to oblivion. Thus, we see that God lives in all things.

### **The Divine Presence in the Holy Eucharist**

Fr. Dunstan explains the nature of God's presence in the Holy Eucharist: "God is present in the Holy Eucharist... The human and divine nature of God the Son is present in the form of bread and wine. The incarnate God is available with His own Body.

"Our Lord enters into us in the form of the Sacrament which holds His body, blood, soul and divinity as we

receive the Holy Eucharist. Thus, He resides with us for a long time. Nevertheless, as God, He is always and ceaselessly present with us until, unfortunately, we get into some grave sin.”

Fr. Dunstan speaks with Jesus Who ingresses into him as he receives the Communion: “You entered into my heart a few minutes ago. Make me conscious of at least a part of Your stature. Let me burn with Your love. Strengthen me to be prepared to sacrifice anything for Your sake including all my interests, comforts, time, health, and talents. May I fully understand how magnificent is your arrival into my heart. Let me remember Your visit throughout this day. Help me to express my gratitude at least through little acts of sacrifice.

Fr. Dunstan was conscious of the infinite value of the Holy Eucharist and the Holy Body and Blood. Once when he was offering the Holy Eucharist at the hospital chapel in Saravanampatti, a few drops of the Blood of Christ were spilled on the altar clothes. Immediately, he washed that part of the cloth and drank the water. After the holy Mass, he checked and found that the two spreads placed under the outer cloth were also wet with the holy Blood; he washed those parts too and drank the water. Subsequently, he called the Sister in charge of the sacristy and said: “Wash this cloth today itself. Pour the water you use in a place where nobody treads on it.”

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 (the red 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.

### **God Is *Antharyami* (Indwelling)**

After elaborating on two types of God’s Presence, Fr. Dunstan talks about a third type. It is the abode of God in human soul through grace. The aforementioned two types are only to strengthen this type of God’s Presence. “As an Omnipresent God, He makes human soul His Temple. God desires to reside with the soul for eternity. All other actions of God are oriented to ensuring His Presence in the human souls. The very Eucharistic Presence is, in fact, meant to protect the human souls from being sullied and to ensure its strength and growth. The purpose of God creating and sustaining all things, erecting the Holy Church and establishing the sacraments were all aimed at making human soul His temple and to adorn and strengthen it. How immensely does the unfathomable God desire to dwell in human soul! His Eucharistic Presence will exist only until the end of the world. But, if the human soul dies in divine grace, it will remain God’s Temple for eternity.

“All Christians, who are without grave sin and in a state of grace, move around carrying the Presence of God. God is truly present in every one who receives baptism and lives without grave sin. We tend to forget this. God is always present as a guest in our soul.

### **Constant Remembrance**

“Why do you always stand looking down?” This was the question that Maria, his brother’s granddaughter asked Fr. Dunstan. “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 as 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 on to a paper."

Remaining in constant remembrance of God was a part of life for Fr. Dunstan. Remembrance of God can be understood as reflectively holding on to God in one's heart and lovingly remembering Him.

The eyewitness account of Sr. Adelaide FCC is as follows: "One day, I happened to visit the CMI house at Saravanampatti. After having tea, I moved to the backside of the house. Fr. Dunstan was doing garden work with a spade. I looked to his face. It was throbbing with a love. He was conversing with someone as he continued to work. It appeared that he was involved in praying ceaselessly."

We can summarize the explanation that Fr. Dunstan gave on remembrance of God's Presence through the various letters he wrote to his sister Kochuthresia: God lives within human beings. But He cannot start or continue His dwelling in a human soul without the consent of the individual. Even after consenting to let God dwell within, to make His stay a joyous one, our cooperation is essential.

God lives as our guest. Hospitality is our duty. We should not disappoint God, who resides in us with utmost love and eagerly awaiting our little acts of hospitality. If we seat the guests who come to our house in a corner and do not go near or converse with them, they will feel very bad, wouldn't they? We would be showing huge disrespect

towards the guests. What will the guests tell others? "I don't mind it if they couldn't offer good food or expensive facilities to me. But what stopped them from saying a few words of welcome? I was tired of waiting for them. No one cared to even turn towards me." This is precisely the experience of God as He lives in human hearts.

It is the responsibility of each individual to host the indwelling God and to initiate a loving conversation with Him. This is an easy path to attain holiness.

God alone is our subject of our thought from now on. If we ponder on any other topic, it should be only in obedience to God's Will, only for the sake of God. Do not waste time thinking or speaking about that which is not useful. Remember God and converse with Him frequently.

To be in a loving conversation with us is the desire of God. We need to communicate all our joys, desires, sorrows and even our thoughts to Him as to a dear friend. Whenever we can find time, we should enter the cave of our heart and speak a few words with Him. Let us pray and live with God always.

We can see that God is sad on account of our mistakes. On those occasions we ought to be contrite and seek pardon. When we resolve not to sin again and to perform penance for the sins committed, we shall be with a vision of His smiling Face again. Do not bring sorrow to dear God. If you remember causing Him pain, you should swiftly seek His forgiveness. Do not allow our lack of trust to hurt God Who is swift to forgive.

Seek His counsel in everything... Carefully lend your ears to the Divine Voice from within. Truly believe that God

resides in a soul filled with grace and live accordingly every moment.

Behave with God as with your most dear one. Remember and praise the Indwelling Presence of God as many times as possible through the day. You can keep Him in your thoughts at all times. You just need a moment to remember Him amidst your daily chores. Gaze lovingly into yourself. Let your continued good deeds nurture the indwelling Presence of God Who is pleased with your virtuous acts.

Fr. Dunstan, then, prays for the blessing to remember God's Presence: "Grant me the grace to always remain with You Who continue to dwell in my soul. Draw me towards You frequently during this day. Let it so happen that I turn to You Who dwell within and seek Your counsel before each time I speak, act or decide on anything. May this day be filled with intimate conversations and expressions of love. Dear Jesus, grant me these graces.

"Do not let me speak when it is time to remain silent. Let me no speak without seeking counsel. Do not allow me to speak a word more than what is necessary. Let no word escape my mouth before I seek Your guidance.

"Let Your Spirit reign absolute sovereign within me, so that even when I am busy or in a crowd, whether in the solitude of my room or anywhere and everywhere, my beloved God, I may live only with You."

He trained not only his sister but also the aspirants who were entrusted to him, in practising remembrance of God's Presence. Fr. Dunstan had committed to memory the contents of the book 'Practice of the Presence of God' by Brother Lawrence. He would procure several copies of the

book and place it in the library when Fr. Dunstan was the novice master. He also instructed the novices to read this book.

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.”

### **Days and Nights in the Divine Presence**

Right from his childhood, Fr. Dunstan lived in union with God, by practicing and training others in remembrance of God. It was in the splendour of the divine Consciousness that his persona was formed. 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.

When he was healthy, the sight of Fr. Dunstan, meditating on his knees with folded hands in the chapel was a sight to behold... truly inspirational! As he enters into meditative ecstasy, occasionally he would fall into a state of *sushupthi* or trance. Once a novice asked him, “Why do we see you dozing off in the chapel at times?” Fr. Dunstan 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.” This conversation inspired the said novice to remain before the Divine Presence in the Blessed Sacrament.

With the passage of time, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan!

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.



## Chapter 8

### THE VIRTUOUS PATH OF COMPLIANCE

Ittooppunni, when he came out of his house at the young age of 14, had resolved thus: "I am totally subject to my Superiors from now on. I shall go wherever they send me." This was the spirit of religious life that Fr. Dunstan adhered to throughout his life.

Fr. Dunstan 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.

It was at the behest of Fr. Malachias, the Prior at Ambazhakkad where Fr. Dunstan, the Procurator, began to note down his memoirs. One day, when he sat down to write, he suffered as he was not able to get into the groove. Yet, his obedience to the Superior's orders motivated him to do his duty. Fr. Dunstan writes: "Very reverend and dear Father, as usual I sat at my table to start writing before 4.30 am. Now the time is 5.45. I do not feel physically disposed to do this work. Not even a single leaf has moved till now. It is very warm too. I had decided to start writing the story of my life today. As usual, it is not easy. Two days earlier, the situation was conducive to start by this time. Gratitude towards God swelled in my heart and started flowing in the form of a prayer. But as the time was not yet ripe to start, I did not write then. If the beginning is not right, continuance will be difficult and turn out to be a mere waste of time.

That is the reason why I sat through this time without doing anything. I felt like not writing anything today. I have not refused what you commanded me till now. So, I could not fail today. I took the pen in my hand to write come what may. I shall write something today.”

### **Obedience Is a Holy Sacrifice**

Ittooppunni 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 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 Ittooppunni’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. Dunstan 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.

Fr. Dunstan recounted an incident during his novitiate days in connection with obedience to superiors. There was a special machine (He was not able to recollect the details of the machine.) in the monastery. It entailed heavy physical effort to use it. Usually, the novices operated the machine. The novice master had instructed the novices not to work on it more than the stipulated time. One day, the overzealous Bro. Dunstan worked for more time on the machine. That night he developed pain in the chest. As a novice, he did not have the practice of praying for the redressal of his own ailments or sorrows. Nevertheless, on that occasion, he prayed thus: "I did it in disobedience. Lord, kindly remove this chest pain."

His Superiors have never felt any anxiety in appointing Fr. Dunstan wherever he was needed at a given time. With absolute freedom they took decisions regarding his transfers. He was always docile to the decisions by the Superiors.

Many a time, his appointments lasted only a few days or months. Yet, he fulfilled without fail the firm resolution he had taken when he started from his house at the age of 14. Obediently, he started to the place he was sent. He took up the assignment without taking into account its importance or his position. His obedience to the instructions and orders from the Superiors was natural and did not smack of any tinge of artificiality. He did not have much luggage or dress of his own when he moves to another place. So, transfers were quite easy for him.

On 13 June 1979, Fr. Dunstan was appointed the Prefect of St. Antony's Ashram at Saravanampatti. After a mere seven days, he was asked to move to Ambazhakkad to assist the novice master there. Fr. Blaise Kadicheeni was the novice master there. Fr. Francis Kanichikkattil was the other team member. Though the age differences were too wide, they worked unitedly as a formation team. Fr. Dunstan was rich in his experience in formation and elderly than Fr. Blaise, the novice master. But he never pushed for any personal agenda of his own. Instead, he cooperated completely. His accumulated wisdom from long years in formation and above all, his spirituality came in handy for the priests and brothers.

For two years, Fr. Dunstan functioned as the first novice master at the novitiate in Saravanampatti. Fr. Antony Puthenangady took over subsequently. When a new Superior is appointed, the custom was to transfer the outgoing Superior. Here, Fr. Dunstan continued there assisting Fr. Antony discharge his duties. Nobody could find any disturbance in both of them working together.

Fr. Dunstan, the veteran formator who just moved out of office, was never a hurdle to Fr. Antony, who was on his debut as novice master. He provided total support. The obedience and docility that he offered Fr. Antony, once his disciple, was a lesson for the novices. There were many who criticized the decision by the Superiors and some even teased Fr. Dunstan. Positions of authority never held sway on Fr. Dunstan; nor did he feel ashamed to be humbly subject himself to authority.

Fr. James Aloor, the rector of the aspirants at St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara had to move out in the midst of the

academic year in 1986. In his place, Fr. Dunstan, who was a member of the novitiate team member at Saravanampatti, was appointed on 16 November. He completed his assignment and returned the next year by 4 July to his previous place.

The rector of the aspirants at CMI Bhavan, Palakkad in 1987-88 was Fr. Thomas Payappan. As he was leaving to Germany for pastoral ministry, he had to move out in the middle of the academic year. In this situation as well, Fr. Dunstan was called upon to fill the vacancy, having been transferred from Saravanampatti on 07 January 1988. Four months later, on 03 May, he was again transferred to Little Flower Aspirants' House at Saibaba Colony as the assistant to the Rector.

### **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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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."

An individual who left religious life and leads family life as a high-ranking government officer speaks on how Fr. Dunstan continues to be a steady influence in his life. What continues to influence him were the humble attitude of Fr. Dunstan towards his Superiors and his openness: "Both in my family life and official life, the openness that I learnt from Fr. Dunstan have been of great help. If I had continued in my pride, I would have been unmanageable even for myself. I would have had to run away from my government job. Even my family life would be in doldrums."

### **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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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."

In 1953, the CMI Congregation was trifurcated. On this occasion, Fr. Dunstan filled the form informing his preference for a province. The letter he attached to the form addressed to V. Rev. Maurus Valiyaparambil, then Prior General, is a clear witness to his openness and obedience. He writes:

"As long as Devamatha (Thrissur) province gets sufficient members, I desire to be a member of the Central (Kochi) province. This is my right choice..."

"Wherever be my station and work, if it is God's Will, I am happy. I have been living here for four years, enduring a great deal of mental suffering. Yet, I am prepared to continue here too. However, I would like to stay in some monastery where the discipline is adhered strictly for two or three (at least one) month continuously.

“I said ‘I am prepared to continue here’ to inform you that I am not desperate. However, on observing the prevailing situation, I feel a change from here is necessary. Since the circumstances here are easily available through V. Rev. Fr. Abraham, the Prior, I am not going into the details. Before appointing new members, it would be wise to have a dialogue with those being appointed. The problems here are continuing for years now...”

There are further instances to show his style of obedience wherein Fr. Dunstan expressed his wishes to the superiors with child-like entitlement and freedom, yet humbly expects decisions from them. The letter he wrote to his Provincial, Fr. Canisius Thekkekara, is one such example.

### **The Intensity and Subtlety of Obedience**

It was a very strict rule for priests and religious to pray the Breviary, the official prayer of the Church. Failing to adhere to this rule was considered a grave sin. When Fr. Dunstan was the Rector of aspirants at Varandarappilly, many have seen him reciting the canonical prayer after finishing all his works, doze off in the middle and start again and after completing it, going to bed well after midnight. It was also an understanding then that it is okay to make the night prayers, if not possible to recite in the night, to be recited before the morning prayers. In this line, he would wake up from sleep by 12 am or 2 am and pray.

Fr. Dunstan was eager to arrange offering the Holy Eucharist in a way that appeals to his own prayer dispositions and useful for the novices. However, the liturgical rules did not provide the scope to do so. One day, he sought from Bishop Joseph Irimpen permission to spend some time in silent thanksgiving right after the Communion.



Permission was denied. Without any complaints he moved forward with better convictions surrendering to the Church authorities.

Coming to know that Fr. George Nereparambil was preaching retreat to the people in the charismatic style, he advised him: "It is good. But, do not leave out the basic prayers of the Church. Let there be no prayer or adoration leaving out the prayers like Our Father and Hail Mary." He made these observations since he had seen that when people accommodate new styles, they tend to avoid the old ones.

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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan was the Prior that the college at Varandarappilly was inaugurated. Fr. Principal wished to make the inaugural function grand. Fr. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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.

Here is an incident that happened soon after Fr. Dunstan took charge as the Vicar of Varandarappilly parish: There were some leading figures in the said parish. People were afraid to raise their voice against these individuals. They had the last word within and without the parish committee. One day the Vicar was speaking in the parish committee meeting. A man without an imposing figure with his uncertain rhetorical skills was explaining things to the people. But his words were quite unacceptable to the leaders. Obviously, they tried to obstruct his speech. "Sit down. Here, I will speak." roared the Vicar. The so-called leaders were frightened to no end. They did not expect such a sharp reaction from this being!

### **Obedience in Formation**

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."

In the letter Fr. Dunstan wrote to his Provincial - Fr. Canisius - clearly shows his attitude of openness and freedom towards the Superiors: "There are a few pitfalls in my spiritual matters. I am using the word 'few' only because it is to you; otherwise, they are really big. Many things are not being done due to my forgetfulness and procrastination. I beg for your prayers."

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.

When there arose a few issues among the novices, Fr. Dunstan, their Rector, called for a meeting to discuss and iron out the differences. After a long dialogue, Fr. Dunstan spoke to them about the '*nyaayam peshal*' (dialogue for justice) 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.

Once a novice was sick and admitted in Vimal Jothi Hospital at Saravanampatti. He was going through a lot of mental stress. Fr. Dunstan, his novice master, spent considerable time with him. He listened keenly to all his problems and concerns. Seeing this, Sr. Herman said: "How patiently does Fr. Dunstan listen. Father is listening to the brother like a woman." Patience, perseverance, sympathy and mercy were all understood as virtues natural to a woman. Fr. Dunstan lent his ears to the candidates like a woman, especially a mother.

### **Obedience to Social Regulations**

Fr. Dunstan respected the rules and common courtesies of his country and society. He wanted to become a saint at the age of seven motivated by love for his country. With the same spirit, he performed each of the little duties in his daily life and expressed his patriotism.

In the religious poverty that he took up in life had the dynamics of love for his country. To use or hoard things more than what is necessary is against the spirit of poverty. The things we stow away for later use usually ends up being wasted. Moreover, stockpiling of goods entails production of more goods. Overproduction means gradual drying up of the sources of raw materials. In this way, our nation will become even more deficient; people will become poorer. Fr. Dunstan used to say, "If you love your nation you need to live in the spirit of poverty."

He believed that we should not be content with just following a few rules, we ought to be guided by convictions. Once when he visited his home, rainwater was flowing like a river on the road in front. The reason was that the drainage canal on the sides was blocked. On enquiring with his family members, they replied that it was the duty of the government. "Do not wait for the government to do the job. We need to remove the block and clear the system. We need to keep performing our duties towards our nation." Fr. Dunstan exhorted them.

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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.

### **Obedience even in a Hazy Memory**

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. Dunstan seeking forgiveness.

During the later years of his life, as his memory began to play truant, Fr. Dunstan, 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 9

### PLACED RELATIONSHIPS AT A SANCTIFIED MILIEU

In his autobiographical notes, Fr. Dunstan 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.”<sup>1</sup>

Fr. Dunstan 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, everything is according to the wishes of my Superiors. I would go wherever they sent me. I was even prepared never

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<sup>1</sup>Fr. Dunstan, 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.

to return home. In my mind, I was dead with regards to my family.”

Religious life is equivalent to death. He explains: Death is the end of life. A religious brings an end to three types of life: A life seeking fame in this world and following one’s own mind; a life enjoying physical pleasures; a life desiring worldly things and keeping them under one’s control. As regards these three types of life, a religious ought to die...

“Jesus sacrificed these three types of life on the cross for us ... totally. Look at the Lord on the cross. As a thief among thieves and as a laughing stock for all, he is hanging there. What respect was left for him? With a crown of thorns on head, nails on hands and legs, sores all over the body so as to make the whole body one big sore, he is gasping for his life breath: what bodily pleasures are waiting for him? How immense is his detachment from worldly things for Him who lies on the cross with no place to rest his head and not even clothes of His own to cover the body! It is to emulate this Lord that one becomes a religious; offers totally to God through the vows of obedience, chastity and poverty. Thus, the attempt is made for union with God. One forsakes the world and seeks to enter religious life as it offers more opportunity to whole-heartedly love God and to live in ceaseless communion with God.”

In the prayer that Fr. Dunstan penned, he clarifies the religious life that he lived: “Lord, I will not be satisfied merely being in agreement with You. I want to become like You my divine Bridegroom as much as it is possible for a mere creature. I earnestly desire to be an acceptable bride for You, O Crucified Jesus. By living the vow of Poverty, I want to be like You, Who suffered because You were

stripped naked without even the bare essential things and without a place to lie Your head. By renouncing all comforts and pleasures through the vow of Chastity and other acts of penance and austerity, I yearn to become more like You Who did not have any bodily solace but suffered all over. By virtue of my being obedient to others in all matters except sin, I earnestly wish to become like You Who were obedient even unto death to human mind. This is the purpose of my religious life. If not for this, then why do I go about putting on this act?"

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.

His sister Mary first joined the Apostolic Carmel religious order at Mangalore. Then she bid adieu to it and joined the Sacred Heart Congregation in Kerala. No one informed Fr. Dunstan about this change in congregation and consequent difficulties of his sister. Later, when he came to know of the details, he wrote a long-drawn letter to his home showing his displeasure at being kept in the dark and his anxiety regarding the fluctuations in his sister's vocation. By the end of the letter, he writes: "I need to learn to stop losing my peace thinking about your burdens. Let God's Will be done."

### **Familial Bonds Imbued in Spirituality**

Fr. Dunstan 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. On reaching his brother's house, he would meet each of the ten children individually. He would enquire and discuss on their wishes, plans, future, vocation and the like. He would provide relevant pieces of advice. Occasionally, this might go on till midnight. After everything is over, he would go to the monastery for his night rest. 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. Dunstan 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.

### **When Hearts Meet in Spirit**

Fr. Dunstan 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. Thomas Panikulam, 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 was 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.”

As Fr. Dunstan said, he loved the members of his own community with heart-felt emotions. He was transferred to St. Joseph’s Bhavan, Attappady while he was the Prefect at Devamatha Provincial House, Patturaikkal. In the letter he wrote to the Provincial on that occasion, he notes: “The thought of leaving the members of the Provincial house ... brings down tears in my eyes. I felt the same emotions only when I moved out of my house in 1935.”

### **Friendship and Religious Chastity**

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan told him, "It is not correct for us brothers to sleep in a room behind locked doors."

In the novitiate at Saravanampatti, a novice played the role of the mother of St. Chavara in a drama. Fr. Dunstan saw a woman wearing the traditional Kerala dress and was about to send 'her' out of the house. Even when his memory was failing, he was aware and made it loud and clear that women had no place in a monastery where only men religious were expected.

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 had taken deep roots in him.

## Chapter 10

### 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 are beyond their riches. I found it easy to be satisfied with what I have and to adapt with the situation."

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan would ask the candidates, "If so, what would one, who renounces his own mind, get?"

The convictions he had on the virtue of poverty, its practice and the changes he brought within by this practice are presented in a nutshell here: "I strived much to exercise poverty in my personal life. The endeavours and lifestyle in our monasteries have caused me much pain from the year 1942 (philosophical studies) as they are not in line with the poor around us. In 1944 (during his theological studies), when I developed rheumatoid arthritis, I felt it was a blessing in disguise. By then, I had developed into a baby revolutionary. Once I was sick, I started focussing on self-sanctification. I did not feel responsible for others' holiness. I fell in love with the dietary restrictions, medication, pain and isolation that ensued. Everything became so simple as far as I was concerned. All hopes of priesthood vaporized. Thus, God saved me from becoming a rebel."

There is a chance that intense convictions, concepts and principles turn one into a proud and pessimistic person. Fr. Dunstan had started to go down that lane. Ailments and sufferings mellowed him down; transformed him and made him more unassuming.

### **Signs of Interiority**

The simplicity in lifestyle and behaviour, sustained by Fr. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan



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."

Fr. Wilson Tharayil skilfully describes the arrangements in Fr. Dunstan's room: "There was a cot, a table, a chair, a trunk box and nothing else in his room. In the clothesline he had a pair of cassocks, undergarments, and a bath towel. There was a pair of rubber sandals in the corner, a book and a pencil on the table... this portrays the full picture of the room he lived. Just as Mahatma Gandhi squatting before the charka, this elegant picture of Fr. Dunstan sitting there poor, without much possessions should make us think."

Fr. Dunstan used to visit a monastery in Kottappadi to hear the confessions of priestly candidates. He was given a room which was stocked with the usual items like soap, towel, brush, paste, and comb. The brother in-charge of the guests felt doubtful since Fr. Dunstan never touched these things. One day he inspected the room when Fr. Dunstan had gone out. That is when he understood the secret of the bath towel being used by Fr. Dunstan. He was using a piece of his worn-out cassock to dry himself after bath.

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."

Once, Stanislaus, the nephew of Fr. Dunstan, came over to meet him. At that time, Fr. Dunstan was mending a broken belt using thread and needle. A broken chappal was nearby waiting to be mended. So, he asked his uncle, "Does the congregation need such poverty?" to which his uncle

responded saying, "The congregation needs such people too."

He would discard something only after making optimal use of it. He wore habits that had been torn and repaired. He was not very particular about wearing footwear and often walked around barefoot. Even when he did wear shoes, they were quite simple and often in such poor condition that even a roadside shoe-repairer would disregard them. As for his shaving blade, when it became blunt from long use, he would reuse it after sharpening it by rubbing on the wall. He could see value in things that others considered waste. He took care to collect materials and make them usable. He would gather objects scattered around the campus and store them carefully, expecting to use them again in some way. He made beautiful flowers out of paper and plastic covers and gave them to the chapel for decoration.

After washing his head and face with a cup of water he would say that now he needs only to wash his body down in the bathroom. On occasions, he was seen shaving his face using handwash at the common wash basins.

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. Dunstan: "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. Dunstan took part in it. On the way back, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan was member of the Novitiate House at Saravanampatti, he received one hundred rupees from Fr. Joy Challisserry, the Procurator. After a month, Fr. Dunstan told Fr. Joy, "I shall give you the account for Rs. 100." "Mmm!" Fr. Joy nodded. After some time, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan quite characteristically smiled and said, "That's not necessary. Let me check again." After a few days, Fr. Joy saw a clearly tired Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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.

As the Prior of the monastery at Varandarappilly, he openly acknowledged to Fr. Provincial during his Visitation that there was a glitch of one thousand five hundred rupees in the account. Taking responsibility for the mistake, he wanted to be removed from office as he thought he was a misfit for the task at hand. Fr. Provincial's response was: "Father, it seems you have forgotten to write the accounts. I know you; this congregation knows you; we know that, in your spiritual book, you are not at fault."

### **Fear Ensues When the Pocket Is Full**

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan slept through the night in that bus.

On another occasion, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan asked him. He was granted permission.

A journey to Attappady: Two aspirants were with him. It was around 8 pm by the time they reached Palakkad. There were no more buses to Attappady after that. There was no other go but to sleep in the bus stand. Fr. Dunstan and the brothers slept in the bus stand. They had money just enough for bus fare. Where can they safeguard the purse with this money? Thieves were quite common there. Fr. Dunstan placed the purse on his headside where all could see and slept on the cement bench. The logic behind was if some thief was in need, let them take it. If he focussed on safeguarding it, he might lose his sleep. So, let the purse be in clear public view. That was Fr. Dunstan's logic. No thief wanted that purse. The logic appealed to the aspirants who were with Fr. Dunstan.

### **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. Dunstan 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 had food from the convent, the Sisters would sometimes enquire about his food habits. 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."

"Many people do not eat because they are hungry. They eat because it is time or because tasty food is available. Eating food only to satisfy hunger is the best way to keep healthy." This was Fr. Dunstan's dictum.

Every time he comes to take his food in the community, 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: *upma* from breakfast, *sambar* from lunch, *semiapayasam* from tea break, with a little rice. He would not throw away even overripe fruits. 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. Dunstan entered the scene. He tasted a little from the dish. There was no change in his facial expressions. Then, he washed the *upma* using a glass of water 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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, open 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 an experience-sharing: "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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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.

Based on the studies on the Council documents, Fr. Dunstan says: "Religious should experience the pangs of real poverty. The reason for this argument is the call by the Council Decree to bear witness as a community to the poor Christ. It is not sufficient for me to live poor; I need to strive to live poor in the community of Christ's witnesses."

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.

The aspirants at Ranchi were using a specially packeted tooth powder to brush their teeth. Though very useful, as it had a nauseating smell, they did not like it. They named it *chaazhipodi* (a kind of insecticide) for brushing the teeth. The people in the area were using tender twigs from neem tree and others to clean their teeth. Parting the twig into two, they used it to clean their tongue. One day, Fr. Dunstan told

them during an exhortation: "During the seminary life, candidates coming from financially sound families swiftly adapt to the simple lifestyle. But those who come from financially poor situations seek more comforts. In religious life, there is no distinction between those from poor or rich families. Just have a look at the quality of the tooth powder that you use. It is good for you to ponder on your desire to get much more expensive toothpaste.

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.

When Fr. Canisius Thekkekara was the Provincial, he wrote a letter to the members of the province seeking them to volunteer for specific apostolates. He wrote: The chances are bright of realizing the Synaxis resolution to "Take care to select and appoint within this year two or three personnel to minister in the small pastoral centres." The mission to venture into locations where the facilities are frugal, establish centres in the name of the diocese, nurture them into full-fledged parishes and hand over to the diocese is quite selfless and self-effacing. Those who are willing to take over this mission kindly inform within this month."

To this letter from the Provincial Superior, Fr. Dunstan wrote a reply. From among the various ministries that Fr. Provincial has listed out, he replied that he gave priority to the one in the small pastoral centres. He provides the reason for his options too: "As I feel it is next to impossible to

witness in this way while staying in a monastery, I am seeking to get to pastoral centres, though I naturally like to stay in monasteries. Another reason is that I feel more suited and easier to serve the poor Catholic families that stay in places where priests have not yet ventured sufficiently. This may turn out to be a channel to reform our congregation.”

Fr. Dunstan clarifies this notion further in an interview: “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 and I accepted it.”

Before commencing his journey to Attappady, he wrote to the Provincial: “...I am preparing come what may. I do not wish that we have the farmlands of Attappady, and that too sixteen acres. (He thought it would be hard to live a worthwhile life of witnessing value when the monastery has such vast lands.) I shall happily accept what the congregation asks of me until I get to what I visualize.

“I do not foresee any difficulty in living out the rest of my life without any particular facilities; I just want to live according to my conscience. I am preparing to do something to the best of my knowledge as I love the congregation and the Kerala Church for the sake of God... The present endeavours are only to please God.”

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. Dunstan 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 an ascetic in him.' It wouldn't suit you at this advanced age.' I suggested.

### **Experiments in Simple Life**

Fr. Dunstan deeply loved a life of poverty. He desired to practice it in a special manner and named it 'simple life'. In 1989, along with Saju Chackalackal, then a regent, Fr. Dunstan started an experiment in special practice of life in poverty for one and a half months at Chennimalai, near Erode.

He did not stop his experimentations regarding simple life with this short stint. He wanted a companion. Fr. Sunny Ukken came to his rescue. The concept was accepted in the Superiors' meeting of the province. What was left was to find an appropriate place.

Heeding to the desire of Fr. Dunstan, Fr. Raphael Kannanaickal, then Provincial of Preshitha Province, Coimbatore, wrote a letter to Mar Joseph Irimpen, Bishop of Palakkad diocese (dated 29 November 1989): "Fr. Dunstan 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.”

In response to Fr. Provincial’s request, the bishop granted permission for ministry and communal practice of a life of poverty to Fr. Dunstan and Fr. Sunny at Kulakkattukurissy, the station church of St. Joseph’s parish, Kadambazhipuram.

They prepared a daily routine and started their stay there. Offering holy Eucharist, prayer, Bible study, reading Church documents, cooking, cleaning, home visits and the like continued seamlessly. They took special care of the children in the vicinity. They prepared the children to assist at Mass; taught English; conducted a retreat for them. Knowing many in the parish were newly baptized, they started visiting their houses; they strictly refused to take anything from the homes they visited. They practiced vegetarian food. They had to board a bus to Kongad for getting their vegetables and provisions. Bus service from their village was only once a day.

While trying to level the land using a pick axe, Fr. Dunstan’s bald head was hurt. He had a similar experience twice when he was at Ambazhakkad.

They had an agreement with the provincial authorities that the then mass intention amount of eighteen rupees would suffice for their food, dress, travel and medical expenses. After an eleven-month long experiment in simple living, it was found that their daily expense amounted to only rupees nine per person. The balance amount was remitted with the finance department.

After several years, in his last days as his memory was failing rapidly, Fr. Dunstan was visited by Fr. Sunny. Fr. Dunstan greeted him quite familiarly as if he had good memory; made him sit on his cot, held his arm and asked: "Father, when we were at Kulakkattukurissy, both of us were one, weren't we?" Both of them sat there and cried. The touch of this saintly soul, Fr. Sunny says, hasn't been erased from his mind.

### **Lover of the Poor**

Fr. Dunstan 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.

The institution for *aakaashaparavakal* (birds of the air) was started in the CMI Preshitha province by Fr. Sunny Ukken. The prayers of Fr. Dunstan were a strong support to this noble venture.

Fr. Dunstan had compassion on the poor. A poor old man from the locality was appointed as the watchman of the CMI house at Ranchi. The poor man's appearance and dress were pathetic to say the least. One day the dresses of the aspirants left on the clothesline disappeared. It was later discovered soon that it was the watchman himself who stole the clothes during the night. Banerjee, the supervisor of Gupta, the landlord, wanted to reprimand him. He held the man at his arm threateningly. Fr. Dunstan took him aside and asked him not to hurt the watchman. These are the words Fr. Dunstan told the aspirants afterward about the incident: "Some steal because of their situation. The clothes which you were not too keen to use were precious in the

eyes of the poor watchman. We ought to just show a blind eye to such incidents.” He was very sad when he came to know that the watchman was removed from service and replaced by another.

Fr. Dunstan, who always took a stand for the poor, would say that we should not spoil them by doling out goodies but empower them to help stand on their own. When he was in Ranchi, a street hawker who sold balloons, whistles, flowers on the streets, came over to the aspirants’ house and requested for food. Father gave him food and befriended him in no time.” 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 a higher good. Father taught him to make one more product – a special flower using China paper!

Within a short period, the hawker returned to Jothi Nivas. Fr. Dunstan had arranged for some China paper to teach him to make a type of whistle. He became an expert in that whistle-making. Father fed him and gave him some more paper for the craft and bid farewell.

Once again, he returned to greet Fr. Dunstan. He brought a bag full of paper whistles he had crafted. He said: “Since the whistle is made of China paper, when people blow it from their mouth, it gets wet and is easily damaged. It does good business though.

Indeed, Fr. Dunstan was a man with the lofty thought of not simply giving alms but of teaching to work for a better living.

### **Spirit of Poverty in Work**

A retreat for novices was going on at the novitiate house in Ambazhakkad. Fr. Genesisius Konikkara was the preacher. In the course of the retreat on poverty, he pointed fingers at a person in the garden through the window and said: "This is another dimension of the vow of poverty. You should work like this without lazing around." The person Fr. Genesisius pointed to was, of course, Fr. Dunstan. He was doing the maintenance work - mixing cement and plastering - at the forest chapel (*vanavaasakappela*) near the monastery without any help."

The preacher humorously added: "That father is toiling in the sun in vain. He will forget to water the plastered area. So, I want you to help him." But Fr. Dunstan did not allow them. He thought that such work would distract them during the retreat. Fr. Dunstan never forgot to water.

Fr. Dunstan loved physical labour. It was a part of his spirituality. He considered it as an inseparable aspect of his life of poverty and prayer. Temptations and problems are quite common in life. Hard work, he considered, was an effective antidote to overcome them.

He was not ashamed of taking up any work. He took up in right earnest any work like gardening, cleaning the toilets and surroundings. In case of dereliction of duties by the formees like cleaning the surroundings or utensils owing to carelessness or laziness, he would take it upon himself to do them.

Before arriving at Ranchi, Fr. Dunstan was at the monastery in Attappady. He was staying and ministering alone there. Apprehending that he required rest, the Superiors send him to Ranchi. However, on reaching



Ranchi, keeping aside his need for rest, he went about happily serving the aspirants.

On several occasions, Fr. Dunstan took on the chef duties. Despite the biting cold, he would rise early, finish up the cooking with charcoal-based stove and reach in time for the morning prayers and Holy Eucharist. When the aspirants queried about his loss of sleep time, he would answer: "Once you go to the college, I have no other work to do. I can sleep then."

During a certain period of time, shield bugs (otherwise known as 'rubber egg') was causing much perturbation to the people in Varandarappilly. These pests would flood the church during the night. That Fr. Dunstan, when he was prior there, would wake up early to rid them all, was an inspiration to the aspirants.

He would reach the chapel before anyone else does, and open all the windows. He would retire to his room after night prayers only after ensuring all windows have been closed. He found satisfaction in fulfilling small things for the sake of the community.

### **Man of Total Renunciation and 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. Dunstan 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 of 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 treasuring the sense of being beyond, without ever losing it. 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! In short, Fr. Dunstan!!

## Chapter 11

### A TREE, BLOOMING IN VIRTUES, SPREADING ITS FRAGRANCE

A fragrance emanated from Ittooppunni as he entered the novitiate. For sure, he might have applied *athar* (perfume). The novice master pulled him up and gave him a piece of his mind. A nonplussed Ittooppunni said that he had not applied *athar*. The source of the fragrance, after a short enquiry, was found to be the *laangi* (ylang-ylang) 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 *laangi* tree at the monastery in Ambazhakkad.

Fr. Dunstan 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.

#### **Living in the Light of Faith**

As Fr. Dunstan 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 every day. 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 pm, 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."

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. Dunstan 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.

He surrendered to God's Will even when he prayed intensely. A novice once approached Fr. Dunstan seeking his prayers for his sister who was diagnosed with cancer. Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan's exhortation "Do not be cross with Jesus" while later mourning his sister's demise.

His disposition to surrender himself totally to the Divine Will is explicitly seen in one of his prayers: "May You dwell

and act freely in me. From this instant, let me live only for You subjecting all my freedom to You. May none of my acts of virtue be seen other than those that You Who dwell in me perform through my organs. Even if I act, from this moment, let them be only because You commanded it or You Will it...

“Help me to do only those that pleases You the most. Prepare me right now to faithfully and lovingly observe the Constitution and the vows that I am about to make. Let me become an oblation to Your Will. Whatever be the cost, I just want to be able to please You...

“Draw me so much to You that all worldly pleasures turn bitter to me. Grant me the grace to toil only for You. Let no creature or even my self-interest have anything to do with it. Cleanse my soul thoroughly that not even a shadow of selfishness remains there.

In his exhortation to the people who approached Fr. Dunstan 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.”

### **The One Who Lived the Divine Mercy**

The person who lives placing all hope and trust in God alone is certainly one who had experienced a profusion of love and mercy of God. He would ceaselessly meditate upon divine mercy and emulate it in life. He would receive and gradually personify divine mercy.

He shares his reflections on consciousness of death to his nephew Justin. He opined that by meditating on death, one gets rid of the fear of death and can grow in the love and trust in God: "Remembering one's death is good. There is no need to be too afraid. It is good as long as it motivates one to live well. When one learns to love God and trust in His mercy, fear reduces and love gets strengthened."

In the morning melody penned by Fr. Abel for the *Sapra* (Morning Prayer) in the first edition of the breviary, we see:

Fill not our hearts with despair  
 Close not the doors of grace  
 Pull not Your caring Hands  
 Judge not, shorn of mercy.

It stuck in Fr. Dunstan's consciousness the words that do not add up with God's mercy in the first song that the community sings together early in the morning. He shared about it to several others. He requested Fr. Abel to rewrite the lines. Fr. Abel conceded and wrote:

Lift Your hands of compassion  
 Remove our suffering and lead  
 Spread Your light in our heart  
 Mix Your judgment with mercy.

Fr. Dunstan, with ample experiential knowledge of how divine mercy works in life, cries out filled with God's love: "Loving Jesus, I love You. I love You with all my heart, all my soul and all my strength.

"Help me love You more and more. More than myself, more than any person in the world, more than everything else in the world, let me love You.



“God of all, I prostrate before You in adoration. Sweet Jesus, I love You; adore You; praise You and thank You. When I ponder on how to love You, I understand my love to be so cold and dull. Let my heart burn with love towards You. I yearn to love You just as Your Mother loved You. I wish to live to be inebriated with Your love, forget everything and live forever in Your Presence. Let it happen to me according to Your Will...”

### **With God as the Sole Refuge**

“Jesus, my divine Bridegroom, grant me the grace to wholeheartedly offer up the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and faithfully live them till death do us part. Lord, I am a helpless infant who is incapable of doing nothing of itself. It is indeed this limitation that urges me to be with You, Omnipotent Lord. Who can defeat those who trust in You!” This is a part of the prayer he wrote for his sister Kochuthresia.

Intense sufferings – physical and mental – were an integral part of the life of Fr. Dunstan from his birth to death. He was all the more conscious of his gnawing limitations as he fought to conquer the weaknesses that blocked his efforts to become a saint. God was his sole anchor of trust. We could see this attitude of trust reflected in his letters and prayers.

We shall read a few excerpts from the letter he wrote to his sister Kochuthresia: “...it is good if you find confidence in God. He alone is unchanging and eternal. This God is our Father Who loves us more than anyone else. Whatever be our mistakes, once we repent, He forgives; He doesn’t even consider them ever again. So, put all your trust and hope in God and love. Believe that whatever happens to us is

allowed by Him for our good. If some challenges still remain, pray that you be able to suffer them according to His Will.

“Our life here is a preparation for our heavenly life. Blessed are those who teach themselves to remove their mind from the worldly pleasures and to find joy in God and divine things. We can find lasting peace and satisfaction only in God our Father. He will certainly provide the necessary strength to withstand any difficulties to those who curtail their whims for the sake of God. Trust God and believe in Him just as a child would. It is foolishness to put our trust anywhere else. God alone is unchanging.”

In the letter to Stanislaus, his nephew, too, we can perceive the shades of this disposition of trust: “We have no one else to trust but 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.”

### **Walking in the Love of the Neighbour**

Loving his brethren whole-heartedly was a characteristic of Fr. Dunstan. 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.”

We need to abandon our self-interests for the sake of love of our neighbour. Alongside, we need to constantly turn to God to seek His Will. Fr. Dunstan feels that those who thus seek the divine Will, will not falter in practicing love of the neighbour. He prays for the grace: “May it be that I will not be found wanting in charity. How will it happen if I turn to You always for counsel? Remind me always to turn to You and strengthen me to act exactly as per Your Word.” “Teach me to forget self and be more concerned about the wellbeing of others.”

As a child, Fr. Dunstan says that he was short-tempered. However, others opine that Ittooppunni was more tranquil in nature than many others in the family. His father had borrowed money from many people in the village. As he was not able to repay the debts in time, they started coming to their home asking to pay up. The family members were unable to pacify those who were angrily abusing standing in front of their house. In fact, it was Ittooppunni who could, at least on occasions, talk to them as the situation warranted. He would talk to them calmly; behave humbly and so, the angry men would return peaceably.

Fr. Dunstan 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.

There was a person who would carry water to the nearby ladies' hostel from the well in the campus of Jothi Nivas, the seminary at Ranchi. The man, who had to draw water and carry it in tins on his shoulder, was a hydrocele patient. He struggled a lot to walk. Seeing this, Fr. Dunstan would occasionally draw water to help the man.

George, the cook in the seminary, was an expert in the art of mimicking. Once during a field trip, he mimicked many people. In between, he mimicked a hydrocele patient carrying water. Obviously, Fr. Dunstan felt it was done in bad taste. He did not like him imitating and making fun of the old sickly man. He made his mind clear to the aspirants.

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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan to the request of the army personnel.

Fr. Dunstan had mastered the art of being humane and of closely observing the surroundings as also to creatively respond to the needs of others.

In the course of his vocation promotion drive, Fr. Dunstan would stay overnight at his niece Mary's house located at Ayyanthole in Thrissur. Once when he went there, he found that the maid was a pregnant lady. He observed the gestures and the way she was performing the chores. Next day, before he started, he told Mary: "The maid is pregnant. I don't feel it is appropriate the way she turns, bends and lifts while performing her chores. The baby may have to bear the brunt. Do ask her to take care."

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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.

Joshy Parackal, hailing from Kottappuram, Mannarkkad, and was an aspirant in 2000 at St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara, shares: "One day, while playing basketball,

I twisted my leg. The damage was so heavy that it was believed that my leg was beyond repair. A local *vaidyar* (*Ayurveda* practitioner) treated me. I was laid down for a month and a half with my leg placed in a sheath filled with oil. Fr. Dunstan would come frequently to visit me. Then he would pray in the chapel for long periods. Seeking to instil a spiritual disposition in me and invoke divine thoughts – as I cannot go to the chapel – he prayed the rosary sitting next to me. My leg healed slowly but steadily. God healed my leg, which was thought to be impossible to heal, because of the rosaries that Fr. Dunstan prayed sitting near me. To this day, my eyes well up when I relive the experience.”

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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan leant on his bed only after ensuring the brother used the blanket and sheet.

As the chillness increased during the night, Bro. Jose covered Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan without his knowledge was back on Bro. Jose. Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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."

### **Love of Neighbour Is Mutual Help**

Praying for others, acts of sacrifice, forgiving, and vicarious suffering based on charity, Fr. Dunstan says, would bring good for oneself and for others. Both are bound with an unseen thread provided by the said virtues. While he was rector of aspirants, Fr. Dunstan writes to his sister Kochuthresia: "It would be great if you could offer your sacrifices for the sake of my children. If you help them to become good priests with your prayers and sacrifices, you will receive a share from their good deeds too."

In the advice he gave Justin, his nephew, too, he repeats this perception: "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 physically, at least spiritually."

The aspirants at Ranchi had a teacher they disliked. The bitter experiences they had from this teacher became a frequent topic of their conversation. "Simeon was a person who was blessed from among those who were present in Jesus' journey to Calvary. It is because only Simeon was blessed to help Jesus in carrying the cross. If you take your bitter experiences from the teacher as the cross handed down by Jesus to Simeon, you will completely abstain from complaining with a slight tinge of vengefulness. Moreover, if you can forgive him and pray for him, you will be bringing him closer to Jesus."

When he offered holy Eucharist in the private chapel at the novitiate house in Ambazhakkad, preference was given to offering requiem mass. When we pray for the departed souls, we are, in fact, praying for ourselves. We are all part of the mystical body of Christ.

The prayer that was sent for the usage of Kochuthresia, the younger sister, by Fr. Dunstan, the elbro, is a self-offering seeking to be transformed into an instrument of charity:

"Lord, continue to reside and act in me so that my presence will be a source of peace and consolation to those around. Let me be a help to the needy; let the suffering heart be consoled seeing the compassion in me. To wipe the tears of those who are crying, to ignite faith to those who are confused and in doubt, to bring courage to those who



struggle with a mind lacking in strength ... in short, to be prepared to become everything to everyone, Lord, give me Your own Heart. Teach me to always remember with love and compassion as well as to respect my sisters and others. Grant the strength to my words that they may aid to cool their inner wounds and heal them completely. Lord, as Your bride, I wish to love and console everyone just as You would. I seek to totally emulate You Who led Your earthly life doing good to all around. May those who are with me get the same experience as those who were with You. Kindly mellow my heart down for this to happen. My heart also ought to burn out of love of God and charity for Your sake. Jesus, humble and meek of heart, make my heart like Yours. May I be totally transformed into You. Let those who see me perceive You in me."

#### **Fr. Dunstan of the Holy Family**

In his times, someone who joins the CMI Congregation, at the beginning of their novitiate formation, would take a second name which reflected their special devotion, spiritual aptitude and orientation. This name would be of some saint or a unique depiction of the names of Jesus or Mary. Accordingly, Fr. Dunstan chose the Holy Family as his second name. He was known as Dunstan of the Holy Family T.O.C.D.

"Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46) was a question swelling with insult. Yet, disappointing the naysayers, something wonderful came from Nazareth. It was in the poor house in Nazareth that the Word became flesh. The Immanuel became known as the son of Joseph and Mary.

The family that consisted of Jesus, Mary and Joseph was fragrant with virtues. Mary and Joseph lived meditating upon God and always submitting themselves to God's Will and His providence. Humbly obeying these two mortals, the Son of God lived a hidden life. None of them claimed extraordinary visions nor did they make much noise. The rule of hard work was strictly practised in their family. These are some facts that attracted Fr. Dunstan. The excerpts from various prayers depict the appreciation he had for the Holy Family: "God help me. Mary, my dearest Mother, pray for me. Make me love Jesus, remember Him, listen to Him, be with Him always. St. Joseph, model of interior life, teach me to work hard in union with our Lord."

"O St. Joseph, for the sake of Holy Mary and Jesus and in their presence, emulated their divine example, worked hard and lived. Help me and teach me to (place the three of you before my eyes, emulate) and live like you.

## Chapter 12

### 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 Olakkengil family made the family of Ouseph, thus entrusted to them, to stay near them in their own land. He had total freedom in Olakkengil 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 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan, throughout his life, was careful to respond positively to the signs of the love of Christ exhibited by the people of other religions.

### **Sanctity of the Missionary is the Missional Means**

The primary objective of missionary activity is to give Christ to others. Rather than other means and instruments, one's own life and personality is to be the measure of missionary activity. Fr. Dunstan prays: "Transform me totally into You so that those who see me and closely observe my activities may see only You in me as well as my activities. Thus, You may dwell in me and act in me..."

"Make me humble, innocent and childlike. Help me to bring souls closer to You. Fill me with the Spirit of Your love. Then, I shall be able to pour out that love among the souls."

### **To Ambikapur...**

Abyssinia, Persia and Ambikapur were the missions where the CMI religious were first called up for missionary work beyond Kerala. Fr. Dunstan was one among the three who first volunteered to go to Ambikapur. But that wish did not materialize. What Fr. Dunstan had noted in different places are summarized here: "With great hopes, I had applied when there was a call for those who were prepared to go to the missionary places of Abyssinia and Persia before the

Congregation was divided into provinces. Since these places were part of my daydreams even before joining the Aspirants' house at the age of 15, when the call came, I rapaciously volunteered. It was the sixth year after my Ordination. As the division into provinces was taking place, there were no further steps in the direction; there were no replies either.

"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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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.

The services of Fr. Dunstan are engraved in the Silver Jubilee report of Holy Trinity Parish, Threethwamala: "On 25 May 1976 Fr. Antony Thottan moved out while Fr. Dunstan CMI took charge as the Forane Vicar of Thavalam parish. His services were made available to the Threethwamala parish until 10 October 1976. Though his services were available only for a short period, he came all the way from the CMI house at Pakulam keeping aside all his other responsibilities. He walked five kilometres to reach Threethwamala, offered Holy Mass and took good care of the spiritual needs of the parishioners."

On several days Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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 he reached the villages, people would surround him. They gave a special place for him in their hearts. They perceived him as a spiritual guru who was filled with love, mercy and compassion.

When Fr. Dunstan left Attappady after four years of ministry, the village folks from Osthiyur 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. Dunstan would invariably choose his stint at Attappady.

When the novices from Ambazhakkad, as part of their formation, came over to spend a few days in the tribal villages, it was Fr. Dunstan who led them from the front. "What should we do?" the novices asked, to which he



responded, "You should teach them the letters." He was certain that it was primarily through education that they will have growth and development.

### **Lord, Send Me...**

Fr. Canissius Thekkekara, the Provincial, wrote a letter to the community inviting more missionaries to the Sagar mission. Fr. Dunstan replied to that letter: "I am prepared to go there and do what I can. I think that learning a new language may be an obstacle now. I do not know whether the climate would be conducive. I am only happy to give it a try... I have never felt that I can go to the missions and make a considerable contribution. I have always been conscious of my limitations. The only thing that kept motivating me is my desire to offer myself. I felt I could help the missionaries. By nature, I love the monastic life. If there is no one to go, I am prepared, if you think I am okay."

When Fr. Paulson Kannanaikal, the missionary to Kenya, recounted his mission experiences, Fr. Dunstan 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, sought the assistance of Fr. Dunstan, seeing that his diocesan priests and religious needed a spiritual director. Even though he expressed his consent immediately, situations did not allow it.

Even when his memories were fading and was nearing his end, his dreams of being a missionary had not dimmed, not a bit. Once he requested for thirty rupees from Fr. Davis Thattil, the novice master at Saravanampatti. When

enquired “Why do you need thirty rupees?” he answered: “I need to go to the mission. I need thirty rupees for bus fair.”

### **To Preach the Gospel around the World**

Going to distant mission lands to preach the Gospel was a dream that Fr. Dunstan cherished from his childhood. However, other than the one year as Rector at Ranchi, he did not get any opportunity to visit the missions. But God chose him as an instrument to prepare and send several CMI missionaries to different missions around the world. It is not only in the Devamatha province that his disciples have gone with the light of the Gospel, but also to different CMI missions in Coimbatore and Bhopal provinces as well as in countries like Germany and the USA. Behind all their achievements in the missions, the prayers and hard work of this revered priest has played a definitive role.

He would exhort the candidates that the person who has received the gift of vocation should be prepared to serve anywhere in the world. He took care to nurture attitudes suitable for mission work in the candidates.

Chacko was a Malayalee businessman in Ranchi. He made a living by bringing Kerala special food items, going around on a bicycle and selling them. He would visit Jothi Nivas with his products like Kerala *pappadam* (flakes), onion, green mango pickle, *sambar* powder and dried fish. One day Fr. Dunstan told him: “Chacko, don’t be hurt. Instead of taking the pains to come here, you could visit the places where Malayalees live in large numbers and do good business. And, in case we need something, we shall inform you when you come here for Sunday Mass. Then you can bring them.” Missionaries should leave behind not only their homeland but also their culinary tastes. They need to

adapt the food habits of the missions they go. This is also a part of the missionary spirit.

Despite losing his business, Chacko continued to visit Jothi Nivas. His relationship with Fr. Dunstan was totally spiritual.

The aspirants used to cultivate tapioca in the Jothi Nivas campus. The tapioca stems brought from Kerala would do well in Ranchi. Tapioca would give a good harvest in the institutions where Malayalees lived in the area. Fr. Dunstan loved the farming done by the aspirants, except that of tapioca. He shared with them the comment made by a veteran Jesuit missionary from Belgium about Malayalees: "Keralites can never be good missionaries. They continue their Malayalee food and Malayalee culture wherever they go. It has been a very long time since I reached India all the way from Belgium. I have adapted to the food and lifestyle here, completely forgetting the Belgian way of life."

Fr. Dunstan continued: "I don't want you to throw away the tapioca stems; just take cues from the words of the elderly missionary.

A Hindi teacher would come to Jothi Nivas to teach the aspirants. He was a tribal Christian and had a very jovial disposition. One day, he was having lunch after his class. Ghee was placed in a cup along with other dishes. Taking it to be soup, he drank the ghee while having his lunch. Fr. Dunstan did not see this happening. It came to his knowledge only after lunch. By that time, the teacher had left. When the aspirants came to know about it, they made a joke out of it. They spoke about the incident and laughed out aloud. "We need to call him back and ask him to take hot water. May be the ghee has solidified and it stuck in his

throat. Our teacher will be saved if we serve him warm water." Someone casually joked and everyone laughed.

Seeing them making a joke out of it, Fr. Dunstan said: "You are in a mission land and are preparing to be missionaries. You don't need to do mission work in a place where everything is perfect. Never again I want you to laugh at the teacher. I should have taken care. I should have guided him to mix the ghee with the rice. The mistake is mine. It is not appropriate for the students to make fun of their teacher. You are not hostel students; you are aspirants. You should never laugh at your tuition master."

### **Fr. Dunstan's Castles in the Air**

Doing mission work in distant countries was a dream that Fr. Dunstan cherished since he was seven years old. All his efforts to go to the missions after his Ordination never bore fruit. Instead, his ideas and thoughts regarding missions developed. In December 1955, he wrote down certain points to be practised in the missions under the title 'My Castles in the Air'.

#### **1. A Missionary Community of Religious Brothers**

A community of religious brothers need to be established who can adapt to the situations in this nation in order to swiftly accomplish evangelization of India. They need to go before the priests arrive in the mission areas and begin their work. They need to move out once the mission gets established and is functioning smoothly. St. John the Baptist, who was not a priest yet was ascetic, simple, humble and the one who prepared the way for the one coming after, should be their Patron.

After these introductory notes, he further writes explaining the details regarding their lifestyle, food

habits, dress code and fasting as well as spiritual chores and apostolic responsibilities.

2. Missionary Families

Help families that lead an exemplary Christian life to get settled in the mission areas.

3. Holidays of Catholic Students

Trained Catholic students can be made to stay in the nearby mission areas during their vacations. It would be better if they are seeking to be priests in the future. They can be entrusted the duties like teaching Catechism to the children and to prepare the children to receive the Sacraments like Confession, Holy Communion and Confirmation.

### **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. Dunstan 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 13**

### **A DISCERNING APOSTLE OF VOCATIONS**

Vocation promotion was an area quite close to the heart of Fr. Dunstan. 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 effective manure for the tree of the Church to thrive.

Fr. Dunstan 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. He 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.

**Encouraging Vocations = Seeking God's Will**

The first lesson we need to learn regarding the realm of vocations is that we need to first cooperate with God. All those who are involved in vocation promotion are cooperating with God; with God's Will and Plan regarding the one who is being called; with the inspiration and action of the Holy Spirit.

Fr. Dunstan adjures that in choosing one's vocation one has to essentially seek God's Will. He presents this thought in his letter to his sister Kochuthresia: "I will not pressurize you to enter into a way of life before you discern God's Will clearly. If those who enter joyfully end up finding it difficult in the course of time, what can we say about others? So, give preference to God's Will rather than our own likes and interests. There is nothing better for us other than God's Will. Whatever it appears to us, give in and seek to fulfil it. God will strengthen us.

"Trust in God. Only those who learn to find peace in harmony with God's mind can experience peace wherever they live. Greatness of the place where you hail from and sound financial position are nothing to brag about. Living in the place and style that God wants is the important thing. Let us keep trying to do what we think is God's Will."

When Fr. Antony Kuttikkatt (Senior) was an aspirant, Fr. Dunstan asked: "What will you do if I send you home saying you have no vocation?" "I will try to hold on in the seminary even if it means I need to beg you." replied the aspirant. Immediately, his rector corrected him: "Son, it doesn't work like that. If it is God's Will, you need to leave. We should not object to God's Will. It's not me, He is the One Who should choose you."

### **All Vocations Are Precious**

Thomas More was the ideal man for Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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.

Once when Fr. Dunstan was in Ranchi, a familiar blind man came to Jothi Nivas sad after having a sharp difference of opinion with his wife. As he was blind, he reached the place with a lot of difficulty. Fr. Dunstan received him lovingly and treated him amiably. They spoke for a long time, prayed in the chapel, and dined with the community. In the evening, he returned home happily.

Fr. Dunstan told the aspirants: "It is a blessing that he went home. He left home planning commit suicide as he had a serious quarrel with his wife. However, he has returned home happily."

He continued speaking about the importance of family life: Our people get married after meeting each other once and that too, for a few moments. Then they live together for years! When you think about it, it's miraculous. How much do they adjust with each other. Amidst all these, they give birth and nurture kids. It is their faith in God that helps them to stay together. Otherwise, there would be a lot of quarrels and divorces."

Today marriage and marital relationships have been subjected to an array of changes; but one thing is true:



without the spirit of faith, marriage cannot move forward successfully.

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 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan."

### **Sanctity, Not Vocation, Is Vital**

The vocation you choose is not important. The important thing is to become a saint through the vocation you choose. He stressed in his exhortations that it was more important to come together in heaven than becoming a priest or professing vows in the congregation.

He wrote in his letter to his sister Kochuthresia: "Let your only desire in life be to become a saint. You can start at least now. God is always prepared to forgive our sins and lead us forward. We need to just repent for our wrongdoings and move closer to Him with good resolutions."

He reiterates to Kochuthresia, who failed in her attempt to enter religious life, that the important thing is not our choice of vocation but attaining sanctity of life. "You felt that you heard the divine Bridegroom called you; you could not respond immediately. You thought about it; looked around. You started your journey but upon reaching the bridal abode, you found the doors closed. Don't worry. Just wait for the doors to open. Stay there and prepare so that when the doors open, He finds you dear to Him. Perhaps the door to the temporary bridal abode in this world may never open. But make sure you spend even the last moments pass by peacefully and with hope. This wait will not be in vain. You will certainly be with the divine

Bridegroom when the door of the eternal bridal abode opens.”

In the prayer he wrote for his sister to use, too, we find this thirst to become a saint: “O Eternal God, Who loves us above all ... for the sake of Your Son Who reconciled us to You, grant me all the graces needed to become a saint. Almighty God, make me a saint, whatever be the pain it might require my selfishness to suffer.”

Before entering into a vocation in life, Fr. Dunstan says, it is necessary for the candidates to gather basic knowledge about that vocation and the purpose of joining. In a letter to his sister Kochuthresia, who was pondering on entering religious life, Fr. Dunstan, after explaining the meaning of religious vows, the difficulties in living them, opens up his mind: “If you do not have lofty purposes, do not go. Whatever suffering you may need to bear, you need to live your religious vocation and become a saint. There is no need to go if you have not firmly resolved to emulate the obedience, chastity and poverty of Jesus. If you just want to somehow live out your earthly life, don’t go. You should even start only after you develop a desire to become a saint. If you don’t have that desire, pray that you have it. God will heed your prayer.

If God so wills, you should be prepared to suffer more than what you are already. Fear not; pray and God will grant you the necessary strength. You will become more precious to God. What do you lose even if humans forget you?

### **The Special Charism of Discernment**

It was a special charism of Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan: “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. Dunstan. 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 the 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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan mustering some courage and opened up. Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan'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.

Fr. Benny Chiramel opens up: "My first year of novitiate was complete. Some of my batchmates had left religious life. Some others are preparing to taking a call soon... Some who were better than me in devotion and talent have already left. So, I was thinking why should I remain in this religious community...

"I went to meet Fr. Dunstan the next day. He enquired about how things were with me. He asked me to come back with a pencil and paper. When I came back with them, he told me just one thing. He asked me to list the reasons to reject religious life on one side and the merits of religious life on the other. I took my time and did as I was told. By the time I completed the task, I was determined to remain in

religious life. In each of his subsequent visits, he enquired about my progress and provided with necessary instructions...

“Fr. Dunstan is my guru who sowed the seeds of a strong foundation for my religious life and taught me to take firm decisions. I doubt whether the people with high degrees in modern counselling could stand anywhere near the personalized counselling by Fr. Dunstan several years ago. I bow my head before the great good that Fr. Dunstan - without any fancy degrees - did to me years back.”

Fr. Antu Nayankara shares his experience: “The crisis I experienced in my first-year novitiate was intense. I wanted to quit religious life. After long discussions with Fr. Jose Paul Edakkalathur, the novice master, I decided to leave. Knowing about this decision, Fr. Dunstan hastened to my room. He was my rector when I was doing my Plus Two studies at Kaundampalayam. I opened up to him. After listening with keen interest, he shared his convictions about me. He reminded me of my aptitude for religious life while sharing his thoughts regarding my vocation. His awe-inspiring words touched the inner recesses of my heart. He walked me on to a more mature reflection on my decision. His simple yet effective reminders acted as a strong turning point in my professed life. My faith, which was given more sheen by his inspiring words, prepared the platform to rethink my decision. That same night, I informed my decision to continue in religious vocation to my novice master.”

An aspirant in Varandarappilly sought permission from Fr. Dunstan, his Rector, at least on five instances, to leave the Congregation. Every time Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan intermittently dozed off and woke up in between the dialogue. Every time he woke, he sought forgiveness. Just before leaving his room, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan would console those in mental agony, caused by the challenges in their life. Once, Fr. Dunstan 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."



A deacon, under much stress since his ordination was postponed, approached Fr. Dunstan, his guru, and shared with him his sorrows. His honest sharing brought about much sorrow to Fr. Dunstan too. "Let's not sit in judgment on the right and wrong of the decision by the superiors. If we go for such an examination, your mind will be filled with hatred and vengefulness. The result will be even more sadness and despair. Persist with the desire to become a priest. Take utmost care in areas that the superiors ask you to rectify. Your desire will get more fortified when you further pray and meditate. Jesus did not call you with a promise to make you a priest within a stipulated number of years, did He? Your focus should be more on your ministry you are going to accomplish after becoming a priest and not on the past... I shall pray for you. Consider that you have received a rose cutting with thorns on them. Plant it so that you may see beautiful flowers bloom from it."

These words of advice from the Fr. Dunstan lighted a lamp of hope in the deacon. He was filled with a spiritual energy that aided him in overcome the difficult situation with a balanced mind. Fr. Dunstan remembered the date and time of his ordination, made a long and arduous journey and arrived for his first holy Eucharist albeit at the time of Communion in order to partake in the joy of the newly ordained priest. The prayerful concern he showed towards a scholastic who was overcoming a huge dilemma was quite laudable.

One of the disciples of Fr. Dunstan 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.

“While at 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. Dunstan’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. Dunstan’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.

“I was sick when I was in the mission. My request to go for studies (M.Sc.) at Christ College, Irinjalakuda, was accepted. 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. Dunstan, but his 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 14

### A WISE FORMATOR

For a lion's share of his religious life, Fr. Dunstan 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 the 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."

Fr. Dunstan regularly reminded that formation is not given its due importance in the congregation, formators generally take up the responsibility without proper preparation and that formation of candidates should be taken more seriously. He would communicate with the Superiors of the need to select suitable members and send them for higher studies in formation. Once Fr. Clemens Thottungal, then Provincial of Devamatha Province, asked him, "So, whom shall we send for higher studies?" "Bro. Aureus," Fr. Dunstan responded immediately. The decision was arrived at very soon. Fr. Aureus Chackalamattam flew to Rome for higher studies. Thus, a personnel was sent for the first time from Devamatha province for higher studies in formation. Fr. Dunstan became the pivot for this new dynamic.

### **Knew the Candidates**

Fr. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan's charism.

### **Encouraged Wholeheartedly**

In matters concerning the spiritual progress of the candidates, Fr. Dunstan encouraged them sincerely. Once, by way of appreciating a novice, he said: "Brother, you have spiritually grown by leaps and bounds. At your age, I used to cry thinking of my spiritual recklessness." Besides humility, we can clearly see the vigilance and sensitivity that he maintained with regards to his spiritual growth from very early in his life.

### **Inspired Purposefulness**

God is the One Who calls us. However, we have the express duty to keep the spark from God glowing; if not, the spark may just peter out.

While in class, one day, Fr. Dunstan asked the novices about their goals in life. They answered him one by one. "Retreat preacher," "Social worker," these were some of the responses. Some answered "Nothing special." "How is it possible to live without a purpose? Can you live without a dream?" He admonished and corrected them.

### **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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. 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.

Fr. Dunstan seldom wore sandals. At Ranchi, the aspirants wore socks along with their sandals. Yet, he found that one of them had developed cracks in their feet. Immediately, he made arrangements for him to get suitable shoes.

He took care to remember even the apparently silly wishes of the young ones and enthused them by fulfilling them as per the situation. During meals, one day, at Jothi Nivas, Ranchi, Bro. Kuriakose Cheeran happened to talk about the taste of noodles. Noodles were a rare delicacy then. Upon hearing the descriptions of Bro. Cheeran, Fr. Dunstan said: "Don't incite craving in these kids. Try to find a way to give them an opportunity to taste it." "Why not? I can make it happen."

Jothi Nivas community went on a trip after a few days. Lunch was arranged at a house of the Gabriel brothers. When they sat down for lunch, each one got a parcel. When it was opened, tasty noodles were in front of them.

Fr. Dunstan, a very poor, forgetful man, with no interest in food at all, kept in mind the wishes of the young ones and prepared a luxurious meal called noodles for them.



It was in 1979 that Fr. Malachias Kannanaickal passed away. At that time, Fr. Dunstan was a member of the formation team at the novitiate in Ambazhakkad. The body of Fr. Malachias was placed in the monastery chapel during the night. The novices spent the night in batches praying in the chapel. It was past midnight. Suddenly, a weasel jumped down from the balcony in the chapel. All were afraid. The weasel just vanished in to the dark. Sensing the panic in the novices, Fr. Dunstan asked them to fresh up, drink the black coffee kept in the refectory and return. But, no one moved as they were under the grip of fear. Understanding the situation, he personally took each individual to the dining room, helped them drink coffee and brought them back.

### **Gently and Firmly**

As a religious formator, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan, 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.

It was a regular practice for the aspirants in Ranchi to go for one-day trips in small groups. Once they return, the group leaders settle the accounts with their Rector. Gathering in the night, sharing the day's experiences and evaluation were part of the routine. Fr. Rector appeared with a note in his hands for one such meeting. "Which snakes did you buy to eat? In which hotel do you get snakes as a dish?" The disciples did not understand the questions. In fact, one of them had mentioned 'snakes' instead of 'snacks' while giving the account for the day. He was humorously correcting this error.

Aspirants, Fr. Dunstan would suggest, should have a hobby. While he was at Jothi Nivas, he gave special encouragement for stamp collection. He instructed them to collect stamps and send it to the 'Holy Childhood' organization. This organization had a project of collecting stamps, selling them and sending the proceeds to missionary work. The special support he gave to stamp collection incited a fierce competition among the aspirants. One of them built a rapport with the postman. The postman helped swell his collection by giving him the stamps he

removed from the post that he had to deliver. The understanding in the seminary was that the appointed person goes to collect the post when the postman arrived. Fr. Rector observed that the particular brother is also contacting the postman besides the appointed one. He confirmed his doubts after enquiry.

“Let us not go crazy working on the hobbies. I have to send you next to the novitiate; not to Srampi. (‘Srampi’ was an isolation facility at Ambazhakkad monastery where sick members were sent for resting in isolation.) The postman comes here to deliver post, not stamps. From now on, no one should collect stamps from him.” Fr. Dunstan admonished. They understood his point. No more did they go to the postman to collect stamps.

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. Dunstan 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. Giving 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 fulfil 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.

### **With Emotion and Prudence**

Four aspirants from Varandarappilly were lost. They lost their way as they went for hiking in the Echippaara estate near the forest. It was evening and the gathering clouds hastened the onset of darkness. It was night and they found themselves alone not knowing the way out. It was very late when they finally managed to reach the ashram walking a long distance. Fr. George Kuruthukulangara, one of them, explains: "We reached with lot of fear. When we reached all others were in adoration for us at the chapel. We were quite apprehensive how Fr. Rector would react. We were sure that our parents will be called the next day and we may have to pack our things and go home. But when Fr. Rector saw us, he mildly chided us and asked us to take bath and have dinner. Also, he reminded us to drink water before taking bath." The aspirants, who had given tense moments to all, drank water, took bath, had dinner and went to bed. They were not sent home.

Years later, when Fr. Kuruthukulangara was reminiscing the incident, Fr. Dunstan added in a lighter vein: "You don't need to brag about getting lost in the forest owing to the darkness and found your way back after a long time. It was our Lady of Carmel who brought you back safe. It was a forest teeming with civet cats. If they had got hold of you crazy people, what would be the situation?"

During the period 1959-60, Fr. Dunstan was the Rector of aspirants at Varandarappilly. As part of the festal

celebration, *kathāprasāṅgam* (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. Dunstan was Rector of aspirants at Ranchi. A good Bengali film titled 'Sister' 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.

On their return, as per the instructions of the Rector, they wrote a review of the film. Thus, he taught them to evaluate movies.

As a formator, Fr. Dunstan displayed much wisdom, discernment and knowledge with regard to granting permissions to the formees. The film '*Mughal-e-Azam*' was playing in the theatres. The film that depicted the romantic life of Prince Salim, son of Emperor Akbar was very popular. Mughal dynasty was an important part of the history textbook of the aspirants in their Intermediate studies. Some of them used this as a cover and expressed their desire to watch the film. They argued that this would be helpful in their studies. "You have plenty of history books for reference. Bro. Cheeran, who is a rank holder in history, is also here. Film may not give you a clear study of history. If frequented, films may dull your interest in studies." In this way, he nipped in the bud the devious plan of some of the aspirants to watch a film.

Once when he found that the advice from the Confessor would derail the vocation of an aspirant, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan helped him 'to look at theology, dogmas and rules in a more calm and objective way'.

Once, when Fr. Dunstan was handling a session for the novices, the novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, solemnly recited in most of 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. Dunstan critiqued it saying, "Oh ... Mary from that picture alone should look at us through her eyes... Hasn't a spark of idolatry crept into it?"

### **Paving the Way for the Streams of Grace**

More than leading the formation as the Master in formation houses, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan was quite disinterested in the fulfilment 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 15

### 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."

When he was eleven, he happened to confess to Fr. Lazar. The boy remembered a sin that he did not inform the confessor only after he left the church. Approaching the priest again, he confessed the sin he forgot. Ittooppunni was quite committed to guard the purity of his soul without any stain.

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. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan 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. Sr. Adelaide FCC describes his visit as the coming together of two saints. She explains: "One day, I happened to visit the bishop at Malampuzha. During our conversation, bishop was frequently looking outside through the window. Soon, I saw Fr. Dunstan coming from a distance with a bag and umbrella. Immediately, the bishop's face lit up with joy. 'I shall come now.' said the bishop and rushed outside. He welcomed Fr. Dunstan respectfully and brought him inside. I was touched by the mutual love and respect. It was the coming together of two saints."

As he was nearing his end, the bishop increasingly sought the presence of Fr. Dunstan. As per his request, Fr. Dunstan visited the Priest Home every week. But soon Fr. Dunstan himself was beginning to face problems due 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. Dunstan, a good Confessor.

Sr. Adelaide reminisces: "Fr. Dunstan used to come over to St. George Convent at Ramanathapuram to hear confessions for monthly recollections. He was invariably on time every day. On his arrival we cannot see him on the chair; neither on the kneeler. He would kneel before the Blessed Sacrament and pray. Then he would start to hear confessions. It was easy and a matter of joy to confess to him. He would listen carefully, lead on by clearing doubts. Subsequently, he would show the way forward and how to do it. I would return from the confessional with much

happiness and peace. When we read about St. John Maria Vianney, St. Padre Pio and such saints, we understand that several people travelled very long distances to make their confessions with them. How blessed am I! God sends such an excellent Confessor for me.”

Many were touched as they made their confession with Fr. Dunstan.” 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. 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. He would also frequently ask questions like: What book are you reading now? Have you finished reading it? Many speak with amazement about the fabulous memory that Fr. Dunstan had in this regard.

If he found that someone needed him, he would immediately get into the Confessional even if he were very tired. Even when his memory was in total disarray, he would tell Sisters when he meets them: "Call me whenever you need." He meant to tell them to call him when they wanted to make confessions. Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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."



Sr. Sisi CMC speaks: "When I was at the convent at Kadambazhipuram, I came to Saravanampatti to meet Fr. Dunstan. When I was working at the sacristy of the parish church at Kadambazhipuram, a young sister from the convent came from the convent and told me: "Mother, please come fast. A priest has come. He has no hair on his head." When I rushed to the spot, the said priest was standing outside the chapel near a window with folded hands and peering into the chapel. Is it Fr. Dunstan!!!? How did he come by here? What could be the reason? I made him comfortable in the parlour and spoke to him. 'You had come seeking me, hadn't you? You wanted to confess. I wasn't there then. I'm on my way to Perinthalmanna. So, I sought permission from Fr. Rector to get down at Kadambazhipuram and Fr. Rector granted permission.' He has come all the way to Kadambazhipuram to hear my confession!!! Such a memory power! I had heard the story when, on his way to Thrissur, he got down at Guruvayoor and, then, on second thoughts, boarded the bus to Thrissur. A person with 'such a strong memory' has remembered me and come down all the way to Kadambazhipuram."

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 to 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. Dunstan have experiences to share on his caring attitude. They testify that his behaviour was natural, free and honest.

One of them remembers his experience: "As an aspirant, I once spent a long time with Fr. Dunstan for spiritual direction and so I went to sleep very late that night. The next day he remembered this fact after breakfast. 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 the 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. Dunstan 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.

Dunstan as his spiritual director, but was not attending the spiritual direction sessions for a long time. One day, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan asked him to accompany him to the bus stop. On the way they discussed his spiritual life. So intense was the zeal that Fr. Dunstan had for souls.

Once, a brother shared his painful experiences in life with Fr. Dunstan. They did not have an opportunity to meet after that. After several months, Fr. Dunstan 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."

It was not only the religious and priests that were recipients of his care but the common people too. When he started as the novice master at Saravanampatti, there were only two Syrian Catholic families in the area. He brought the two families together. He visited the said families and arranged for prayer meetings. He paid special attention to their spiritual needs. He had strictly prohibited expensive snacks during the prayer meetings in the families as he did not want any family to avoid conducting these meetings because of lack of money.

Gradually, a third family came to the area. Their spiritual guide advised them: "We need to work with farsightedness. We need a parish, a cemetery." They started looking for a place to have the cemetery; found a place around one kilometre away from Saravanampatti. Though permission was granted from the diocese, due to various reasons, the project did not take off.

### **Accompanying Spiritual Guide**

Sr. Lissy, niece of Fr. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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 much 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. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan has come." I opened the door and there was Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan 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 have been 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. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan had a fall.”

It is quite relevant to cite the instructions he gave through a letter to Justin, his nephew:

“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.”

### **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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan at night. As it meant losing sleep, he took up the duty without much enthusiasm. But Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan gave him a lot of strength to move forward. He felt that the opportunity to stay all night with Fr. Dunstan was a blessing. Whenever Fr. Dunstan saw him, he would say, "Don't worry; just pray." His words were enough to instill courage and inspiration.



## Chapter 16

### NATURE, A REALIZATION

“From the strength and beauty of the created things we shall know the strength and beauty of their Creator” (Wis 13:5), exhorts the Holy Scripture. Fr. Dunstan loved nature; observed it and learnt lessons from it. This awareness of nature drew him closer to God.

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan shares, “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. Dunstan, 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.

### **Spirituality of the Desert**

The novitiate formation of Preshitha Province began at Saravanampatti, Coimabtoire in 1982. The construction was not completed; no plants or trees near the house. *Manjhappavatta* (a kind of poisonous tree) was the one to be predominantly seen as a tree. The novices were not very happy with the limited facilities there. There were some murmurings as regards the little discomforts.

The novice master started counselling the community as a whole and some individually too. He spoke to them on the desert spirituality. He invited their attention to the Bible passages where God guided the Israelites through the desert and formed them through their experiences there. He had sent in from different sources and introduced the books on the desert spirituality to the novices. Thus, Carlo Caretto's books like *Letters from the Desert*, *The God Who Comes*, *In Search of the Beyond* and Catherine de Hueck's *Poustinia: Encountering God in Silence, Solitude and Prayer* became part of the novitiate library. The convictions that he absorbed by reading these books were part of his regular classes and exhortations.

God chose Israel as His own and led them through the desert to the Promised Land. Like a father to his children, through the sojourn in the desert lasting forty years, God prepared them to be worthy to enter the Promised Land (Deut 8:2-6). He trained them to trust in God's Providence even for their essential needs. Desert signifies the formative path in order to reach the Promised Land.

Solitary places provide us with not so insignificant solace from the pressures of the crowded places (Mk 6:31). They provide a conducive atmosphere for prayer (Mt 14:23); prepares a platform for long meditation (Lk 6:12) and quenches the thirst to be in totally alone with the Father (Mk 14:32-35).

We need to enter the desert occasionally; take a step back from the worldly busy-ness; arrange a desert in our life. We ought to be able to seep in tranquillity, undisturbed by what happens in the mind. The desert spirituality directs us to remain in union with God in the midst of the worldly chaos and to train our mind to maintain our mind balanced and calm like the deep waters.

### **Observing and Experimenting Nature for Formation**

He keenly observed nature. Wherever he went, his eyes would soon fall on the trees, plants and flowers there.

Fr. Thomas Achandy recounts his experience thus: When Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan during this activity. Translating a collection of books written in Old Latin, about 400 years earlier, was a herculean task. It was Fr. Dunstan 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.

The exact information about the plants and trees in the campus was at his fingertips. He was experienced and resourceful enough even to provide tips to those planned to plant pepper, plantain, tapioca and other vegetables. He would take cuttings from pepper vine to plant new ones; in order to maintain good varieties of papaya, he would take cuttings, plant it in sand to get roots and then replant it; planted *thulasi* (basil); plant the medicinal *thazhuthaama* (umbrella plant) and hand over the leaves for cooking in the monastery kitchen.

As the Aspirant rector, when he returns from a journey, more often than not, he will bring along a few plants. He would take the plant cuttings and plant them in pots and ensure that they sprout. He would happily spend the gardening time observing various plants and grafting some. In short, he found immense joy in enhancing the nature's beauty.

As the Rector, he went an extra mile to involve the candidates in his experimentation and working with the nature. He trained them by showing them how to plant seeds and giving fertilizers. He also provided special tips like how to prepare lily plants as the Easter time approaches.

At the novitiate in Ambazhakkad, as the novices were in the garden, Fr. Dunstan approached them and said, "We had plenty of gerbera plants here and nothing is seen now. We may find its roots somewhere here as they don't get destroyed easily. When it rains it may come up; we need to find them." Fr. Dunstan was on the lookout for gerbera plants and he found them. With the help of the novices, he replanted them. The novices were anxious to find out how

these flowers would look. One day, they came out in full bloom: light rose gerbera flowers upon long green stalks!

A special variety of *bambloos* (pummelo) fruits were available in the monastery campus at Ambazhakkad. Most of the plants were old. Fr. Dunstan said: "The pummelo seeds are hard to germinate. Even if they germinate, they may not provide the same quality of fruits. So, let's use the layering technique to develop new plants." Fr. Dunstan taught them the procedure that involved creating a wound on the stem skin of the pummelo tree, surrounding it with coconut pith and dry soil, covering it with cloth and thus ensuring new roots form there.

"Such things double the joy of religious life," he would tell the candidates as he takes care of plants and flowers. Trees, plants and flowers play a vital role in making religious houses more attractive. It would evoke a spirit of life in those living in and visiting the monasteries.

When the novices at Ambazhakkad requested for a celebratory free day on his *shashtipoorthi* (sixtieth birthday), he suggested a *shashtivaadi* (diamond anniversary orchard). He instructed them to realize the project by digging sixty pits and planting plantain seedlings in them.

### **Lessons Taught by Nature**

On many days, one could see Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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 poisonous bushy weed that grows into a tree). Fr. Dunstan 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.

“Good fruits and flowers can be grown only when we prepare the soil, put fertilizers, plant the saplings, water and nurture them. The same is true with our spiritual life too. If our life is to be enjoyable to others, we need to carefully nurture it.” Fr. Dunstan opened the doors of spirituality to the candidates through the lessons from nature.

Once, Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan 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.

Fr. Anto Akkarappattiekkal writes: "I have seen Fr. Dunstan picking small plastic pieces, Ujala bottles and such things from the garden. One day he asked me to pick the plastic items and bring to him. Then I thought, 'What is the use of collecting these things. We would only get a pittance even if we sell it.' Only later did I realize that it is our duty to protect nature and that leaving plastics in the garden is not good as it would contaminate the soil."

### **Following the Footsteps of Gandhiji...**

Fr. Dunstan loved the Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation. He has noted it in his memoirs. He had read his autobiography paying close attention. Through this reading, he has been influenced by the Gandhian thoughts. He discerned the huge influence of the teachings of Christ in shaping the basic Gandhian concept of *ahimsa* (nonviolence).

He emulated in his life the simplicity and nature cure methods that Gandhiji practiced. He experimented by tying up wet cloth and wet soil for certain ailments.

Eczema was something he had suffered from since he was very young. While at Attappady, it started to deteriorate. Following the guidance from the tribals, he would attach leeches to his legs. When they stayed there and drew out blood, he would get some solace from the illness. It was the tribal people who arrived early morning at the monastery campus for work would bring leeches in a clay pot and attach it to his legs.

## Chapter 17

### BEYOND OUTER BEAUTY: RADIATING INNER SPLENDOUR

No outward beauty or charm; no hair on the head, nor eyebrows. But, hidden behind the veil of this plain unattractive appearance was the grandeur of profound spiritual beauty. 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.

#### **Commanded the Respect of His Parents**

His parents respected Ittooppunni. Fr. Dunstan 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."



### **Discernment by the Spiritual Director**

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

### **The Words of Bishop Kundukulam**

Mar Joseph Kundukulam, the Bishop of Thrissur, was present when the golden jubilee of religious profession of Fr. Dunstan was celebrated at Pavaratty. When the bishop reached the dining table for tea, he enquired in his usual humorous tone, "Has he arrived? I'm happy that Fr. Dunstan consented to be present for the jubilee celebrations."

Presiding over the felicitation meeting after the Jubilee Eucharist, Mar Kundukulam said: "Can a man be this innocent? A man who goes about without disturbing anyone nor being the prey to the disturbance by anyone. I had once told him that I'm not happy that Fr. Dunstan joined the Preshitha Province in Coimbatore, because our Diocese of Thrissur has lost a saintly priest."

### **Leaving an Indelible Mark on the People He Met**

It was with much simplicity and uprightness that Fr. Dunstan 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."

A retired college professor came to teach English to the novices at Saravanampatti. She was a Catholic. In the course of his classes, the faults and failures of priests became a topic of discussion. She advised the novices. When she came out of the class, she saw Fr. Dunstan walking towards them and suddenly exclaimed: "He is a saint."

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 *guruvachan* at Varandarappilly with no hair on his head (Fr. Dunstan), 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!"

### **Not Eminent, but a Saint**

Being delegated by his superior, Fr. Dunstan had to preach retreat in a convent. Sisters from different convents had convened there for the retreat. Just after fifteen minutes into the first session, the preacher says, "The content I prepared on this topic is over. Now, you may reflect on what you heard on your own in the Presence of God." This was not restricted to the first talk alone. He was struggling to talk for the stipulated time till the last session. The superior who delegated him also came to know of this fiasco.

Around fifty years later, a nun who took part in the retreat says: Several popular retreat preachers and others have come to lead us in retreats. Yet, I have not yet come

across a retreat that was better than the one by Fr. Dunstan. The thoughts on religious life that he shared remain etched in our minds even to this day.

### **Church of the Apron**

Let us see the experience shared by Fr. Sony Ullattikkunnel, a CMI priest from Thiruvananthapuram province: “We cannot but remember a saintly priest like Fr. Dunstan. I believe that paying attention to the details was part of his lifestyle. That is why the simple face of Fr. Dunstan – whom I have seen only once in my lifetime – remains etched in my heart and lives on in the hearts of those who have seen him.

“Our annual trip, as aspirants at the Aspirants’ House at Mannanam, was to Kodaikanal. On the way, dinner was arranged at the Saravanampatti seminary that belonged to Preshitha Province, Coimbatore. As we got stuck due to traffic on the way at different places, we arrived there very late in the night. As we didn’t have any mobile phones at that time, we couldn’t keep them in the loop as to the delay in our journey.

“It was Fr. Dunstan who welcomed us at the door with a smile as we reached very late. He was with us throughout our time there helping us to move to the refectory, guiding us to fulfil all our needs until we left the place. I don’t even remember who else were there on that day.

“When we reminisce our trip to Kodaikanal, the only thing that remains in my mind is the personality of Fr. Dunstan. If we doubt whether humility and simplicity can influence young minds, Fr. Dunstan is the answer. Why does Fr. Dunstan – whom I have seen only once – continue to remain afresh in my mind?

“Sometimes I wonder while I think about the saintly people that I have met like Fr. Dunstan, *Aatmaavachan* (Fr. Bruno) of Kottayam CMI Province and others, whether their physical appearance is very much the same! Borrowing a phrase from the Gospel according to St. John, I would like to characterise Fr. Dunstan as belonging to the ‘Church of the apron’ as they symbolize the church that acts as servants to all. I consider Fr. Dunstan as a gift to the CMI Congregation because he respects all whom he met, having engraved the Church with the apron. Some encounters we have in life is unforgettable and leads to a beautiful ‘epiphanic’ experience. I treasure the face of Fr. Dunstan in my heart as a cherished relic though I have only met him once.”

### **A Presence That Floods with Memories**

Fr. Dunstan’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. Dunstan in a letter from the family of a novice.

Love filled the hearts of all who took care of him. 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. Fr. John Vianney, the fraternal nephew of Fr. Dunstan, enquired about their relationship with the

deceased. 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. Dunstan 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 to 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 stained glass-work of the Good Shepherd at the front of the chapel: "It's just like Fr. Dunstan."

## Chapter 18

### MARY: MOTHER AND MODEL

All saints respect and love Blessed Virgin Mary. Those who tread on the path of truth can seldom forget the mother of Jesus. We cannot be oblivious of her standing in God's salvific plan and in the sanctification of souls. In accordance with one's own nature, attitude, uniqueness of personality and specific aptitudes, each pious soul honours her with a special role in their life.

Mother Mary had a very important role in the life of Fr. Dunstan. He prayed to the blessed mother herself to grant him the support to love her just as the great saints did.

The special devotion and love towards Mary had its origins in his own family. His mother ensured that, emulating the Little Flower, he recited the prayer of dedication to the Immaculate Mary. His parents used to regularly recite this prayer. Following his father, Ittooppunni started to recite the prayer with great fervour. He later lamented that if only he had heeded the words of his mother and recited the prayer with devotion he would not have gone through the various misfortunes in life.

#### **Mary the Mother**

To Fr. Dunstan, Mary was his mother. He often said that 'the mother of Jesus' is mine too. He conversed with this mother with the tenderness of a baby. It is indeed the mother who teaches her baby to call her 'mother'. It is none other who teaches the baby to call the father 'father'. Hence, Fr. Dunstan seeks the help of Mother Mary to address the

Heavenly Father as 'father' and herself as 'mother'; he prays to her.

Just like a baby cries out to its mother, Fr. Dunstan also cries out to Mary: "O my dear Mother... You are my Mother. It is the mothers that teach their own babies to call them, 'Mamma'. It is they who teach their own babies to call their fathers, 'Papa'. So, my dear Mother, there is no need of any one to come between us and teach me to call you. Reveal yourself to me and teach me to call upon my 'Father'. Come, my Mother. It is like a blind child that calls its mother who is at his cradle. You are ever at my side eager to do to me all the good possible. It is I who live as if away from you."

Inspired by his love towards Mother Mary, he used to recite several rosaries, the number of which even he could not remember. He never kept count of the number of rosaries he recited. He would not remember even the language in which he recited them. Sometimes, he would recite 'Hail Mary' within a decade in various languages like Malayalam, English, Syriac and Latin.

He was of the conviction that no one devoted to Mother Mary would abdicate their vocation. He used to share this conviction contextually with the candidates.

### **Mary the Model**

Fr. Dunstan revealed his desire to Jesus, "I yearn to love You as Your Mother loved You." Fr. Dunstan knew that Mary is the one person who is capable of knowing well the Will of the God the Son regarding him. So, he prayed: "You know well, my dear Mother, the desires of your Son concerning me. Help me, my dear Mother, to reform well. Pray for me. I can hardly hear the voice of Jesus. Lead me to listen and understand. Let me know, my Mother, that you love me. Let

me love you as saints loved you. Praise Jesus for me. Tell Him I have approached you.”

He was convinced that Mary was the exemplar in loving Jesus. However, he is aware that Jesus is to be loved more than Mary. Jesus is the divine Model of falling in line with the Will of the Father. Mary is the perfect copy of this divine Model. And this Mary is able to help us.

Fr. Dunstan knew that love towards Jesus and His mother Mary are interconnected. He tells Jesus: “My only hope is the belief that You are with me. If only I could love Your (mine too) Mother like the saints! How can I grow in my love towards Your Mother without growing in love towards You? Still, I love Mother Mary. I am aware that She loves me more than I love myself.”

### **Mary the Instrument of Sanctification**

There is a possibility of stains easily appearing on the body and dress of infants. Yet, they do not have the ability to clean them by themselves. Mother is their hope in this regard.

Fr. Dunstan bewails that despite him being a monstrance carrying the Blessed Sacrament, the impurities in him hinders others from seeing Jesus and that he has failed in bringing others closer to God. If only he could love Jesus like Mary does, all these would not have happened.

“Lord, if I had emulated You perfectly, if I had manifested You in me, how many could I have brought closer to You. When Your Mother went to visit Elizabeth carrying You in her womb, John, cleansed from his sins, leapt with joy. Likewise, if I loved You and lived like Your



Mother carrying You, how many souls would have leapt towards You with joy in my presence!"

Alongside, he promises to clean the dirt-laden monstrance and make it shine forth. For this, he seeks the help from Mother Mary: "My Mother, pray that all these desires of mine will soon be realized. Help me to imitate Your life of union with Jesus." "My Mother, help me. O! Refuge of sinners, wash me clean from all stains, reform me. I don't know how to improve myself; almost hopeless. Make me a saint. You are my sole hope together with Jesus... Help me repair the past... Mother, make me your good child. Teach me to say your rosary devoutly. Make me faithful at it every day."

### **Evangelist of Mary**

St. Therese of Child Jesus said: "How much I desired to be a priest in order to preach about Blessed Virgin Mary." These words of St. Therese brought about much shame and remorse in her devotee, Fr. Dunstan. He declares his limitation. He seeks the intercession of the Little Flower for the grace to preach Mary setting aside his laziness and shame.

"Mother, help me to preach about you. Your child, St. Therese of Infant Jesus, said that, had she been a priest she would extol your praises. But here am I, a poor dumb priest!...

"O! Little Flower of Jesus, have pity on this useless priest. I am ashamed. When little children proclaim the praises of our Mother, I, a priest, having the duty to preach, remain dumb. Help me to shake off my shyness and idleness. Make me true to my vocation."

### **Committed at the Carmel**

Ittooppunni's devotion to Mother Mary, that was initiated from the family and blossomed with the beauty and legacy of Carmelite tradition, grew due to his close contacts with the religious at the monastery at Pavaratty. Carmelites belonged to Mother Mary. The Carmelite religious revere Mary as their mother. Solitude, contemplation and hard work are the characteristic spiritual values of the Carmelite Order. These are the re-presentation of the life at Nazareth. Thus, the close relationship with the monastery and being a member of the CMI Congregation prepared a conducive atmosphere for Ittooppunni to grow in the devotion to Mary.

Fr. Dunstan was an ardent devotee of Mary, Mother of Carmel. He was also proud of spiritual legacy of the Carmelite tradition. He loved the CMI Congregation as his own mother. The history, tradition and uniqueness of the Congregation were very important for him. He had an extraordinary attachment to Mary, mother of Carmel and the Carmelite charism. He never abandoned the Carmelite habit or lifestyle. Once a novice asked Fr. Dunstan, who was working in the garden at Ambazhakkad Monastery, "Father, why do you wear the cassock, scapular and kappus thus making your work difficult in the garden? Won't it be easier instead to wear pants and shirt?" Fr. Dunstan replied with conviction: "Son, it's not like that. We are religious. It is when we do all our works in our religious habit that we get much joy."

Fr. Dunstan was fascinated by the Carmelite saints - St. Therese of Avila, St. John of the Cross and the Little Flower.

The spirituality of Carmel was profusely present in his prayer and simplicity.

He took a stern position against the efforts of certain confreres who tried to water down or totally abandon the Carmelite charism from the CMI Congregation. He actively participated in the General Synaxis and the various discussions regarding the renewal of the Constitution of the religious order. "If there is a decision to reject the Carmelite charism of the Congregation, give us a few monasteries; we shall leave. We shall include those who are interested and live as a Carmelite Order." Fr. Dunstan stood firmly with the members of the Order who had a similar conviction.

## Chapter 19

### THE SPIRITUALITY OF FORGETFULNESS AND SOME INTERESTING STORIES

Forgetfulness had affected Ittooppunni even when he was a student. 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. Dunstan 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 never reluctant 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.

‘Holy forgetfulness’ is how Fr. Thomas Ambooken characterizes the forgetfulness of Fr. Dunstan. Fr. Blaise

Kadicheeni further explains: "Though his forgetfulness was more like a sickness, he would seek forgiveness and try to compensate for the loss caused by the errors by it." Thus, Fr. Dunstan turned his weakness into his spiritual strength. Thus, it turned out to be a 'holy' forgetfulness.

When Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan. 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan, "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. Dunstan 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 forgetfulness of Fr. Dunstan was not always about forgetting things. 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.

He had a special devotion to the Guardian Angel. He sought the help of his guardian angel to remind him of what is necessary at the right time.

Was forgetfulness a miraculous God-given gift to this holy soul? A special grace of forgetfulness, a grace of miraculous memory! What shines forth in his forgetfulness is the splendour of a gospel of spirituality.

### **Flawless Report**

It was time for the aspirants who had their formation at Jothi Nivas, Ranchi in 1978 to return to Kerala. Fr. Dunstan, the Rector, started his journey back to Ranchi after attending the general and provincial synaxes. As he had not reserved his ticket, he had to take several buses to reach Ranchi. On arriving at Ranchi, he burnt the midnight oil and prepared the report of all eleven aspirants. With the report he started to Kerala with the aspirants.

On reaching the provincial house at Thrissur, as planned earlier, the aspirants were preparing to meet Fr. Alex Ukken, the Provincial. Suddenly, Fr. Rector stopped them and said, "I made a mistake. I prepared the report about you to be given to Fr. Provincial. But I left it on my table at Ranchi. Let me meet Fr. Provincial and share with him about you. Then you can meet him." There was no tinge of embarrassment on his face, only an innocent smile.

He went in to Fr. Provincial's room to meet him. Four of the aspirants had decided by themselves to leave religious life. "Fr. Dunstan will certainly confuse our names when he meets Fr. Provincial. Those of us who want to leave will go to the novitiate and those who want to continue will have to pack their bags and go home."

After some time, Fr. Dunstan came out. Next, it was the turn of the aspirants. Fr. Provincial spoke with about them. He himself listed the names of those who wanted to leave the seminary. He informed that he wanted to talk to them

and added that others could immediately go home for their vacation. The report given by Fr. Dunstan was accurate; it was flawless.

### **Sleeping and Forgetting**

Fr. Dunstan 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. Dunstan'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. Dunstan 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."

When Fr. Dunstan was a member of the monastery at Ambazhakkad, he lost his sandals. He started searching for it in his room, in the parish campus, around the chapel, in the common room and the refectory. Though the novices joined the search party, they failed. The search endeavours were abandoned when Fr. Prior announced, "Let's stop the search. We shall get a new pair of sandals."

Once, Fr. Dunstan went from the Ambazhakkad monastery to the nearby parish at Snehagiri to hear confessions. When he came out after hearing confessions, he sought to wear the sandals but could not find them. They searched for it in all possible places he could have gone like the sacristy, guestroom, washroom, or refectory. The vicar and the parishioners took part in the search. At last, Fr. Thomas Vazhakkala, the vicar, rang up to the monastery and enquired. The answer came from the monastery, "The sandals are here." The search party was consoled.

### **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. Dunstan, 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan would forget 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 Aspirants' House, Saibaba Colony, 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. Dunstan 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 he went up to the first floor to seek Fr. Dunstan. After some time, the same person returned to the phone booth and answered, "Ah... I myself am Fr. Dunstan."

**A Not-So-Interesting Incident**

In the midst of these interesting episodes depicting his forgetfulness, we need to also look into a not-so-interesting incident too. Fr. Thomas Ambooken shares his experience: "During the exams three months after I arrived at the Aspirants' House at Varandarappilly, there was a trunk call from my uncle. It was to inform me about the demise of his eldest daughter (Jolly, my dear cousin, 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. Dunstan closely, my love and respect towards him grew manifold."

## Chapter 20

### A FLOWER BLOSSOMS IN HEAVEN

In his last days, Fr. Dunstan led a life of rest at Arul Malar Illam, Saravanampatti, St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara, and Little Flower Aspirants' House, 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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan to Little Flower Aspirants' House, Kaundampalayam, where he began to stay.

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. Dunstan 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. Dunstan was with them. By 9.30 pm, he fainted and fell unconscious. Fr. Sabu Pallai and 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. Dunstan 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.

The air in this world was not capable enough to keep this holy soul alive. 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. Dunstan'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. Dunstan 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 86<sup>th</sup> birthday, Fr. Dunstan 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 Aspirants' House - 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 Ashram on 21 October for the last rites. The funeral started at 10.45 am at the Bharathamatha Chapel. Mar Jacob Manethodath, Bishop of Palakkad, was the main celebrant. Fr. Justin Koipuram, General Councillor, Fr. Francis Kizhakkumthala, Provincial, Fr. Lucius Nereparambil, Provincial Councillor of Devamatha Province, and Fr. John Maria Vianney, nephew of the deceased, were the concelebrants. Bro. Savio MMB, Fr. Dunstan'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 funeral homily. The mortal remains were laid to rest in the newly constructed cemetery in the Bharathamatha Ashram premises.

Everyone 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 acquaintance with Fr. Dunstan. Just as a withering flower leaves a trail of fragrance, Fr. Dunstan 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 or guidance! Fr. Dunstan of holy memories!



## Appendix

### MILESTONES IN THE LIFE OF FATHER DUNSTAN OLAKKENGIL CMI

27 November 1920	Birth
16 December 1920	Baptism
01 July 1925	Primary education at St. Mary's Elementary School, Puthumanasserry, Pavaratty
06 July 1928	First Holy Communion
24 June 1929	High School at St. Joseph's High School, Pavaratty
22 September 1935	Entered Aspirancy at St. Berchman's Aspirants' House, Pavaratty
25 July 1937	Latin, Syriac studies, Little Flower Aspirants' House (St. Antony's Monastery), Aluva
20 July 1938	Novitiate Entrance at Little Flower Novitiate (St. Teresa's Monastery), Ambazhakkad
23 November 1938	Received Religious Habit
24 November 1939	First Profession of Vows
04 January 1941	Rhetoric, Latin, Syriac Studies at St. Joseph's Monastery, Koonammavu
05 January 1942	Philosophical Studies at St. John of the Cross Monastery, Mutholy
24 November 1942	Perpetual Profession of Vows
19 June 1943	Preparatory, 1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Minor Orders



06 January 1944	Theological Studies at Sacred Heart Scholasticate, Chethipuzha
03 June 1944	3 <sup>rd</sup> & 4 <sup>th</sup> Minor Orders
26 May 1945	5 <sup>th</sup> Minor Order
15 June 1946	Diaconate Ordination
31 May 1947	Priestly Ordination
02 June 1947	Offered First Holy Eucharist at St. Thomas Monastery, Pavaratty
07 June 1947	Theological Studies continued at Sacred Heart Scholasticate, Chethipuzha
20 December 1947	Member at St. James Monastery, Karikkattoor
29 August 1948	Member, Sacred Heart Monastery, Chethipuzha
17 October 1949	Begins stay at Lourdes Carmel Ashram, the Mission house in Ayiroor
March 1950	Member of Lourdes Carmel Ashram, Ayiroor
31 August 1950	Incharge of the Parish which is part of Lourdes Carmel Ashram, Ayiroor
19 May 1953	Procurator at St. Teresa's Monastery, Ambazhakkad
27 May 1956	Rector at St. Pius X Aspirants House, Varandarappilly
20 February 1966	Rector at St. Berchman's Aspirants House, Elthuruth
06 June 1967	Rector at St. Pius X Aspirants House, Varandarappilly
04 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
05 August 1982	Rector at Preshitha College (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
24 May 1984	Member at Preshitha College (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
16 November 1986	Rector at St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara
04 July 1987	Member at Preshitha College (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
07 January 1988	Rector at CMI Bhavan, Palakkad
03 May 1989	Member at Little Flower Aspirants' House, Saibaba Colony
03 October 1989	Simple Life at Chennimalai (Member at LFM Centre, Coimabtores)

- 18 November 1989 Member, Little Flower Aspirants' House, Saibaba Colony
- 14 June 1990 Simple Life at Kulakkattukurissi (Member at Little Flower Mission Centre, Coimbatore)
- 01 May 1991 Member at Sacred Heart Ashram, Perinthalmanna
- 14 May 1991 Animator of CMI Brothers' Unit at St. Elias Aranyashram, Niravilpuzha
- 28 June 1992 Animator of CMI Brothers' Unit at St. Paul's House, Kadalundi
- 20 May 1993 Member at Arul Malar Illam (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
- 04 May 1994 Rector at Little Flower Aspirants' House, Kaundampalayam
- 25 May 1996 Member at Arul Malar Illam (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
- 30 June 1997 Member at St. Teresa's Monastery, Ambazhakkad
- 08 July 1999 Member at Bharathamatha Ashram, Palakkad
- 29 March 2001 Member at St. Thomas Ashram, Kozhinjampara
- 14 November 2003 Member at Arul Malar Illam (Novitiate), Saravanampatti
- 26 June 2006 Member at Little Flower Aspirants' House, Kaundampalayam
- 20 October 2006 Blossomed into heaven



*For more information on Fr. Dunstan Olakkengil CMI:*

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