A MESSENGER OF GOODNESS



Sister Rina Colussi

F.M.A.

by

FR. LUCIANO COLUSSI,

S.D.B.

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DON BOSCO CATECHETICAL AND MULTIMEDIA CENTRE
CALCUTTA-700 015

A

Homage

To

Our

Missionaries

And

A

Challenge

To

The

Present

And

Future

Generations

M E S S A G E

''On the occasion of the DIAMOND JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS of the presence of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, in Northern India, it is appropriate and meaningful to present the life of a missionary like Sr. RINA COLUSSI F.M.A. who worked so much for our Province in North India.

She will be an inspiration and encouragement to all of us, as she lived her missionary vocation to the full.''

Sr. Marie Vazhapilly F.M.A
Mother Provincial

AN APOLOGY

If there was anybody who should not have dared to write a life-sketch of Sr. Rina Colussi F.M.A. it was me, and that for several reasons. The main reason is that I am her brother and so there is the danger of subjectivism due to family affection. Another reason of a quite different nature is that, although I was very much in contact with Sr. Rina in my early years, I had to rely almost completely on other persons not only for the time I was away from her, but also for the rest of my life in India, because our assignments kept us considerably far from each other for almost all the rest of of our lives.

Yet since two Provincials of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, Mother Virginia Marchetti and Mother Marie Vazhapilly, have requested me to read through and edit the written material I had been given on Sr. Rina, I found it difficult to refuse. Of course, besides the request of such authoritative persons, I have to add also personal motives for writing this life-sketch. I am convinced of the goodness and sanctity of Sr. Rina and so I concluded that writing something about her would accrue to the glory of God and to the good of many souls. It would be a source of encouragement to perfection and missionary zeal for the members of the whole Salesian Family, in particular for Sr. Rina's own Sisters. Many young people too would like to live a life of commitment to others on the simple imitable foot-steps of Sr. Rina.

This life-sketch was meant to be published on the glorious Centenary Celebrations of St. Mary Mazzarello, the Co-foundress of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, as a striking re-evocation of her life and sanctity as lived by

one of her Daughters. I am sorry I could not make it for that occasion. The material that was handed over to me was too scanty, unrelated, sometimes purposeless or too personal. So that I had to approach other sources and people who knew her personally, confront the material I had in hand with the new material I was receiving. In the process I had to shorten certain parts and add to others to make the whole sketch more omogenious and balanced. In so doing I feel I could not do full justice to a continuation of the same style because I have been influenced by different sources. Some repetitions may still be found. At other times there may be differences of emphasis on certain events.

I ask to be excused for these faults. These I think, have been caused also by the fact that in editing this life-sketch I had to fight against the time factor, since I wanted to bring it out for the new occasion I was asked for: the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of the arrival of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Assam. It looks providential that this booklet has come out for this occasion: in the year 1923 the Salesian Sisters have first come to Assam to work as missionaries.

Together with the F.M.A. Sisters I think, that for this occasion no better souvenir could have been edited than the life-sketch of a 'concrete' Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, who had chosen to be a missionary as the main motivation in her life. Sr. Rina has made it clear for all of us that sanctity is the only natural outcome of a life lived for God and for souls in the simplicity and spontaneity of the "children of the Father", within the frame-work of one's vocation and mission.

I gratefully acknowledge the written and oral contributions of all those whose names will be mentioned in this booklet, especially of Mother Virginia Marchetti F.M.A. and Mother Catherine Mania F.M.A., who have been so generous with news and views about Sr. Rina. I thank also the other past and present F.M.A. Provincials, in particular Mother Marie, who has been insisting on the timely edition of this little biography. A special word of thanks goes also to Sr. Mary-kutty of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who had gone through the trouble of collecting, lovingly and patiently, most of the material from which I have written the present sketch. Thank you to everybody else, who has helped in the correction, typing and patient proof-reading of the booklet.

May God Bless us all and keep us always in the love of Jesus.

Fr. LUCIANO COLUSSI, SDB.
Easter Day-Holy Year 1983

FOREWORD

To speak of dear Sr. Rina Colussi is like enjoying the charm of a splendid flower-garden: as one feels happy in admiring its flowers, so one enjoys contemplating the virtues that adorn the soul of Sr. Rina. I can affirm with certainty that Sr. Rina was one of the best Salesian Missionaries of North India.

Optimistic by nature and full of great projects for the good of souls, she arrived in Assam at the beginning of 1948. Blessed with good health and with a rich background of experience in our works, she was endowed with apostolic zeal and extraordinary enthusiasm, which have been her characteristic qualities throughout her life.

She was a very talented religious, possessing great organizing capacity. She would fulfil any duty assigned to her with great love and interest, so that whatever she was entrusted with, would be crowned with success, as if she possessed some 'magic' power. This, I feel, was the fruit of her spirit of faith, prayer and sacrifice, which she would offer with so much joy that nobody would be able to understand the cost of them all.

Ah ! that broad smile of hers would look rather like a blooming rose opening up to the rising sun and to the morning dew: it gave the feeling of a soul ever in a festal mood ! Sr. Rina was always open to joy and happiness, a declared enemy of sadness.

She was a tremendous worker: her buildings would

speak enough of what she did on this line. But there are so many things that could be said about her external activity, that will be known only in heaven. I can only add that dear Sr. Rina never mentioned the cost nor made other people suffer on account of her sacrifices. She has been always ready to say 'Yes' to God, her superiors, her charges and to whatever would accrue to the good of souls.

Along with external activity one admires most in Sr. Rina the apostolic and missionary activity: one would say that she was a born missionary ! She could approach anybody, speak to anybody: to her everybody was a child of God. The poor, the orphans, the wretched of any kind had a special place in her heart: she felt to be their "Mother and Sister". She could not bear the sight of suffering people, she would do something for them, help them out, console them at least: this she would do with the utmost simplicity. Nothing was 'over-dosed' in Sr. Rina. Even when after a long tiresome day you could see her face run dow . by fatigue, Sr. Rina would still summon up her strength to "crack a joke", to bring a note of joy to the community: she was the Sister of happiness.

I could say so many other things about dear Sr. Rina, but I wind up my notes affirming: "According to me Sr. Rina is a Saint for the Altars. I am sure that even from Heaven she will continue to help us. She is another St. Therese of Lisieux with the name of St. Rina, who will not stop working until there will be someone who needs her help.

MOTHER CATHERINE MANIA F.M.A.
First Provincial of the Northern Province

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Prologue

— Good morning, Sister !
— Good morning, children. What's the good news for today?
— We thought of you, Sister.
— Really? And what else?
— We dreamt about you last night.
— And that's why you are here now ?
The reply was a hearty smile on the faces of those little children, who would come every morning to Sr. Rina for the greeting and her encouraging words and...a generous helping of sweets.

In this way a happy day would begin for the children and also for Sr. Rina Colussi, the then superior of Auxilium Convent, Nongthymmai (Shillong). Just a few minutes earlier she had felt the happiness of her intimacy with the Lord at Holy Mass. Now it was her turn to share that happiness with other.

She would do that perfectly well. From dawn to dusk she would be moving from place to place, from person to person to bring help and consolation: now to the poor at the door and then to the worker in the garden; now to the teacher and again to the pupil. Often she would be met by one of her Sisters,

who had a request to make or with whom she would share the salutation 'Praise be to Jesus...and to Mary!' Often she would step into the chapel for a short, but fervent talk to the Lord, or stop in front of the statue of Our Lady, Help of Christians, for a prayer. From there she would run to the kitchen to help the Sister in charge and the girls working there. But what she liked most was to be with the children at the school or the oratory: there she would be herself, all for them.

Thus before she could hardly realize, night would set in. Time had passed all too quickly and there was so much more to be done still! Yet every instant of the day had been spent for the Lord alone in the service of his brothers and sisters.

As she closed her eyes in sleep, gladly she would hear the blessing of the Lord: "Weldone, my daughter. Now, come! Rest a while."



1. Birth and Infancy

Sr. Rina was born on 24th December 1919 into the well-known Colussi family of Casarsa (Friuli) in Italy. The centuries old Christmas carols, which filled the air at her birth explain perhaps her cheerful character which helped her to see all things with optimism — a boon of peace and encouragement for everybody who approached her.

Born on Christmas

The birth of a child in any family always brings joy. Rina's birth brought even greater joy, because she came to fill the void left in the family by the death of a baby girl, who was born two years earlier and died soon on the tragic flight of her family from the invading Austrian troops during the First

World War. Rina inherited from that little child not only the love of the parents, but also her name, Catherina Rina.

Reborn in Christ

In the same week of Christmas, on 28th December, Rina was born again as a Child of God, in baptism. If the character that is imprinted in the soul at baptism could be worded, it would run something like this "I belong to God" —words, that came to be so dear to Sr. Rina, whenever she felt the joy of being a Christian and later on a religious. The profound christian life that was lived in her family helped her from her very infancy to open up to God, Father, Son and Spirit, through the infused virtues of faith, hope and charity. The truth of this can be gathered from what her mother would say about her, that among her children she was one of the brightest at learning and reciting her little prayers even before the age of three.

Was this the fruit of her unusual open mind and lively character or of the work of grace at such a tender age? Her own sister Gemma, two years younger to her, speaking of her openness calls her 'chiaccherina' (chatterbox). Her talkativeness was so prominent, that later on her confessor had often to reprove her even after her Ist Communion, because she would confess this fault again and again. But it is exactly this assertion of her confessor that makes us understand that this little child had already come to know that there is a way of talking that is good, as talking with God in prayer, and a way of talking that is useless, like talking too much with men, for which one needs to be sorry.

A little leader

Her exhuberant disposition is proved also by her liking



for games, which had nothing to do with toys or dolls, but with live companions, whose leader she would like to be. Sometimes she had to be admonished not to bring home all the childern of the neighbourhood. But she would be in for a scolding when she would lead these children to the orchard, climb up the trees herself and distribute peaches and pears in plenty to her little friends. At other times the sound of the bugle from the near-by barracks would remind her and her friends of the presence of soldiers and of their marches and drill-performances. That would be enough for Rina to muster her little companions into an orderly troop and start marching to and fro in the yard or the street to their own and their on-lookers' amusement. The funny thing was that since they had neither bugle nor band, they had to play it through their own mouths and as they would not yet know the tunes of the military band they would sing out church hymns, their favourrite one being 'We stand for God and for his glory!'.

Yet in spite of all her bravery and boldness during the day, at night she used to be as fearful as any other child of her age. In this regard her sister Gemma relates: "I was two years younger than Rina, but we looked like twins. We used to sleep together, because we were afraid to sleep alone. She would embrace me tight and repeat all the while 'Jesus! Mary!' Sometimes we would wake up at night and in sheer fright we would run down to mummy as we would not stay alone in bed."

Mother : her model

Maria Assunta was the name of Sr. Rina's mother. Rina loved and revered her mother immensely. An ideal portrait of Mrs. Assunta may be found in the Book of Proverbs regarding the perfect wife. But she was more than that: she was a Christian mother and as such she knew her duties and

fulfilled them to perfection. She knew how to instil in her children, what she herself practised admirably. She would teach them deep piety, which had to be lived in the daily participation in the Holy Mass and the Eucharist, regular reception of the Sacrament of Penance, tender devotion to Mary in the daily recitation of the Holy Rosary and the celebration of Saturdays, Novenas and Feasts, and veneration for the Saints and the dead. She had a tremendous esteem for the Priests and for the Church, love and respect for all people, especially the workers and the poor, zeal for those who needed spiritual and material help and a formidable attachment to work and duty.

In the above description of her mother, it looks as if we have traced the blue print of the sanctity of Sr. Rina. It is really so. In fact up to the time she came in contact with her great models, St. John Bosco and St. Mary Mazzarello, her mother was her shining example of Christian sanctity. The virtue in her mother that struck Rina most was her deep spirit of sacrifice, to which she would refer often during her life. "When as little children we, brothers and sisters, would approach mummy with our troubles and aches, she would say: 'Yes, my child, you are so preoccupied with your little toothache and headache. What about your mummy? When she feels such pains, she never comes to tell you that. And what about Jesus? Did he ever complain about things to his Father? My dear, learn to bear up these little things patiently and silently. There will be so many things you will have to bear in life !'

Another important virtue little Rina learnt from her mother was hard work. When she was only four on returning from her games she would be asked to take up her needle and thread and learn to stitch. She learned even knitting at a very early age. No wonder then that she was an expert in the use of

these articles. She was quick and capable not only at the sewing machine and embroidery, but at every type of work, be it cooking, gardening, cleaning and the like. She learnt everything right from the ordinary household work up to the entertaining of friends and even dignitaries of higher ranks. Saints are not born such, but they become so by dint of correspondence to the grace of God and the guidance of good counsellors. Definitely the first guide of Sr. Rina was her mother — a mother, who could guide six of her children to the sanctity of religious and missionary life. In fact five of Sr. Rina's brothers are priests, and all six missionaries.

Father : an example

Mr. John Baptist Colussi, Rina's father, had a very amiable and jolly disposition: his company was sought after by everybody. He was a traditionally good Catholic, who lived his religion with conviction and enthusiasm. The Beatitudes seemed to be his guidelines and so it was not surprising that he was called often to settle disputes, big and small. Being the father of a large family he was esteemed for the tact with which he would handle his domestic affairs. For this he would be called all over the area for every important affair and decision, both religious and civil, at the same time he seemed delighted also with more humble chores. He would like for instance, to take his childern and the children of the neighbourhood to participate in pilgrimages, feasts and fairs in the family horse-cart. In this way he saw a means to inculcate a piety that is simple and at the same time cheerful, while keeping the youngsters away from frivolous and dangerous entertainments.

It is easy to see that the watchful Rina observed several traits in her father that could be imitated in her future life.

But what she imitated best from her father was his serviceable nature, and his generous disposition. To people in need he would never say no, to people in sorrow he would bring a touch of joy and consolation, to those in trouble he would bring solutions. Besides being an experienced agriculturist, there were lots of other little jobs he would put his mind and hands to, just to be of service to others: from church-councellor to cook, from serving at the altar to serving at the table, from standing at the gun-point of the Nazis as town-hostage to entreating for poor criminals, from being a gold-medalist for being the father of six Salesians to helping in the dressing of chicken and pork.

We can conclude this account with the words Sr. Rina often repeated to her brothers and sisters: "After God and Our Blessed Mother Mary, our parents are the persons to whom we are most indebted for what we are. May the Lord bless them !"



2. Childhood

At the age of four Rina was a regular student at the local parochial Kindergarten, which was run by the Sisters of Providence, a Congregation which still carries on this wonderful work in the parish of Casarsa. Even before that age Rina was acquainted with the Sisters, since her mother would bring her and the other children to the Kindergarten every Sunday after the Evening Prayer at the Parish Church. The little kids would play about or pray with the Sisters, while the mothers would gather for the weekly meeting of the then flourishing Mothers' Catholic Action Group.

With the Sisters

The impact of this early kindergarten formation has been very deep for Rina. In fact this Sisters' Convent would

remain for her the most frequented spot after the home and the church. In future days she became very intimate with the Sisters; she often shared prayer and apostolate with them. She had a strong desire to join them too in their religious life, as many of her companions did, and perhaps she would have done so, if the more open and cheerful demeanour of the Salesian Sisters had not attracted her to what she loved most : work for the young and the missions.

But even in later years already as a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, Sr. Rina always loved the Sisters of Divine Providence. She thanked them in words and by letter; she showed esteem for them and she loved to speak about them. Everytime she would go home for holidays, she would spend much of her free time with them. On the other hand these Sisters would speak of her with admiration to her Salesian brothers every time the topic about her came up. Her piety, zeal and cheerfulnes were the qualities they mostly praised about her. One could understand from their way of speaking how much they had hoped she should have joined them in religion, as the expression of one of them run : "Notwithstanding all the love Rina had for us and our things, she preferred to become a Daughter of Don Bosco".

Besides the little games, skipping, singing and recitation there was one simple pastime very dear to the Sisters at the kindergarten. It consisted in picking up little daisies from the meadow in front of the court-yard and divining one's being good or bad, or one's going to heaven or hell, or the like by pulling out one after another the petals from the daisies. How sad would little Rina be when the last petal would tell that she was bad: it made her think what could she have done to become bad. But tears would roll down her cheeks when the last petal of a daisy would tell her she would go 'to

hell'. It would take all the care and loving patience of Mother Salesia, the superior, to sort out from another daisy the last petal telling that Rina would go to heaven. That would make her happy again: "Yes, I'll go to heaven".

At School

At the age of seven Rina passed from the kindergarten to the village school run by the government. It was a terrible blow for her: the Sisters were no more there to teach her or to play with her, no more their serene joy and kindness. But what she felt most was the lack of moments of prayer both in the classes and especially after the class time. The convent chapel with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament was no more there. She would make up for that lack of love and spirituality, by being even more eager to run to the Sisters and the kindergarten after school hours and especially on Saturdays and Sundays.

Yet apart from that she did like to go to school, because she had come to understand that without education and schooling she would not be able to know many things and perhaps teach the same things to those younger than her at home and at the kindergarten. Perhaps it was this motivation that made her progress at school even beyond the children of her age. She was a born leader and good talker and for this she needed to know the language well. Italian had to be learnt well and there was no means of learning it except at school, because the local Friulan language was talked at home and everywhere else.

Catholic Action

The more than common proficincy in the school, but especially her leadership and love for others gave her a promi-

nent place in local activities. At that time in Italy there was a flourishing Catholic Action, which was encouraged by Pope Pius XI and the Bishops, also as a counterpart to the rising power of Mussolini, who aimed at capturing the youth of Italy by establishing Fascist Associations. Everybody knows what at the time was the impact of these fascist youth movements. Sometimes even clashes would occur between youth of the Catholic action and the Fascists. Rina would boast that she had never belonged to any fascist association, because she had understood that their aim was to detach them from allegiance to God and to the Church. Her whole heart was with the Catholic action associations. Already as an Aspirant of Catholic action she would be placed in charge of 'the smallest children', a work that she loved immensely. She played with them, prayed with them, would take them for little strolls and carry them, when she saw they would not be able to make it.

Naturally, she had a special care for the three smaller ones in her own house: Gemma needed to be continually coaxed, she was so timid, and Luciano had to share with her the scoldings for their being more interested in the things of the church than the work at home, Dino would be her little 'pet' for whom she had to be the little mummy. The three of them had to admit the salutary influence of Rina's sweet example and care.

First Communion

The greatest event of Rina's childhood was her First Communion. She received it on the 1st Sunday of June 1925: she was then only five years and five months old. Her promotion to First Communion at that unusual age tells us many things about her. Her first encounter with the Eucharistic Lord will have a great significance throughout her life. The fact



that she kept recalling annually her First Communion date with exceptional enthusiasm, speaks of the fervour with which she received the Lord for the first time. Here is the witnesi of her First Communion teacher, Miss Carolina Colusss (Fr. A. Colussi's sister). "Rina prepared herself for the First Communion with great enthusiasm. She had learnt and understood that she had to prepare a beautiful heart for Jesus. So she would never let me in peace until I had to give her daily little nosegays in preparation for that momentous day. It was both edifying and amusing to see her coming every day for the Catechism class with her little slip in which she would

enter the little acts of virtue she would perform in preparation for the coming of Jesus—which she would like to be noticed by me with a well-deserved bravo".

The preparation for the first encounter with Jesus was so thorough that not only did she enjoy the full benefit of it herself, but she communicated her joy to her parents, brothers and sisters and all her friends. The joy of it spread throughout all her life, as could be seen from her special love for the Eucharist, but especially from her great desire to teach children who would be preparing themselves for the First Communion. On her First Communion, Rina promised Jesus that she would never say 'no' to him and that she would accept everything with a smile. Anybody who knew her will admit that she kept her promises faithfully throughout her life. Was the charming and serene facial expression that never left her the fruit of her encounter with Jesus ? We are inclined to believe it from an affirmation of her catechism teacher.

Her guide

Part of the credit of Rina's life commitment to Jesus must be given to this saintly teacher of hers, who prepared her and her companions to this important step in her life as a child and kept on following her up later on. Sr. Rina would often relate with emotion how her teacher would vividly describe the life, passion and death of Jesus, especially 'his scourging'. "It would arouse in us great love for our dear Lord and a tremendous horror for every deliberate sin". It was definitely the powerful experience of the love of Jesus that made her feel overjoyed at the thought of being a child of God. It was this joy that was making her say in later years: "We must learn the secret of enjoying the freedom of the children of God and never become slaves to moodiness and dejection. God is

indeed a just judge, but he is more than that, he is a merciful and loving Father".

Saints are not born so, they make their way to sanctify by continuous efforts to love God more and more, to correct their defects and acquire virtues. Rina offers us an example in this. The above quoted Miss Colussi has to say about her childhood: "Rina was a child in the full sense of the word and in saying this I mean to say everything about her as a child and young girl. But as she advanced in years she grew in goodness and virtue by a careful checking of her passions and by a steady following of the invitation of Jesus to grow". Miss Colussi continues: "Rina was a very sensitive child. Any little thing was enough to fill her eyes with tears. She had a vivacious and cheerful character. When she was only six years old she joined the 'Benjamins' (the smallest associates of the Catholic Action). I still remember her eagerness, although she was so small, to fulfill her obligations: attendance at the meetings, frequency at the catechism classes, the monthly tour or pilgrimage, the half hour adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and other initiatives. During the games she had a tendency to stand head and shoulders above the others, but she would soon check herself, when admonished about it. She was always alert and quickly she would sense the possibility of a quarrel or any other disagreement among her companions. At the very onset of it she would recall her friends to good behaviour".

Our Lady was there

As Rina grew into a girl, she also showed an unusual maturity in her relationship with God and men. There was certainly something uncommon about a girl of her age in her piety and zeal. She loved to go to daily Mass and Communion, at first in imitation and in the company of her mother,

but later, on her own initiative. She loved to spend extra time in the church, even after services and in visits to the Blessed Sacrament. At the Catholic Action sessions she had been taught of the usefulness of a fifteen minutes daily meditation and she did make use of this time to be in intimacy with Jesus.

She loved Our Blessed Lady in a veny special way. She showed it by her frequent prayers at her altar in the parish church, by the recitation of the Rosary at home and in church, where she would take the leadership. She would practice little nosegays and offer little acts of self-denial in Mary's honour, especially in preparation for her feast-days. Already before the age of twelve, she would sometimes skip meals or fast for the day for particular reasons she would reveal only later on or because she wanted to imitate some saint or to offer reparation to Jesus for some offence she had come to hear of, or because she wanted some special grace from God or Mary. This she would often do when she wanted some enlightement from heaven in certain events of her life. For others too she would ask special graces and so offer special prayers and mortifications, especially when she would ask for somebody's conversion.

In this connection Gemma Colussi narrates the following episode: "Our uncle Angelo had kept away from church and the sacraments for a long time, because of the untimely death of his eldest son, Sergio, which uncle attributed to God's cruel dealings with him. Many a time Rina had tried, but failed, to have him make peace with God. Finally, one day putting all her wit and trust in God she approached uncle and said: 'Uncle, suppose Sergio were here and he would ask you in my place to come along with us to the church, you surely would listen to him, wouldn't you ? Well, you know how much I loved

him. (He was just one year younger than Rina). For his sake, I ask you, uncle. He is looking down on you from heaven. He is inviting you to forget all that sorrow, to have trust in God who is always so good and merciful and who loves you dearly... I saw tears roll down uncle Angelo's eyes. He was a very stern man, who would not be moved so easily. He pulled Rina close to himself and kissed her on the forehead saying: "Rina, you do not know how much you ask from me. But I never heard words like these from anybody else. Be sure I shall do what you have asked". Rina jumped up out of joy and kissed uncle. But her work did not end here. She knew that uncle would not confess easily to the parish priest, so she went to look for a Franciscan Friar from the nearby town and invited him to our native place so that our uncle could find it easy to go to the Sacraments".

The Sign of the Spirit

In addition to her desire to bring people back to the practice of their religious duties, she had a peculiar way of inviting them, that they could not resist: it was her simplicity, her naturalness, her persuasiveness. People just could not deny her the joy of seeing them do as she wished. But was not there in her something more, something deeper, a power from within, that gave her strength and effectiveness ? We have all reasons to say yes: the Holy Spirit was powerfully operative in her. On 16th August 1929 at the age of ten she received Confirmation together with her younger sister Gemma and still younger brother Luciano, who was only five then. Definitely she was the readiest of the three and of many others for the reception of this important Sacrament, which made her an apostle, an ardent member of the Church especially in the ranks of Catholic Action, as she would beautifully show in her teen years.

3. Adolescence

Adolescence is a very precious span of time in the life of man. During these important years a child works itself up into an adult: it is a time of personalization through a conscious effort to become oneself. This suffices to make us understand the implied struggles that an adolescent undergoes at this age and the need that he/she has of the caring guidance of men and the loving grace of God. Rina was no exception to this common rule.

A true teen-ager

Neither her apostolic zeal nor her great love for the Eucharistic Lord made her less human. As a teen-ager she liked to dress up neatly and somewhat fashionably too. Her hair-style was not uncommon from that of her companions.

Yet singularity was something that she dreaded and despised. Even though her piety was deep, she never wanted it to be taken notice of by others. So when she expressed her wish to join the convent, many were surprised at it. Even her elder sister Dorina has this to say: "When Rina manifested her mind about her religious vocation we were rather surprised, because she dressed up fashionably and attractively, and she had very many friends all over." Though her girlish vanity seemed quite contrary to such aspirations, her apostolic activities and her desire to become good gave evidence of a girl aglow with love of God and zeal for his interests.

With difference

In fact as her vocation matured this become more and more evident. In this regard we have again the authoritative withness of Miss Carolina Colussi.

"As Rina grew, I began to notice a change in her, though she remained alwas very cheerful. She began to spend more time in front of the Blessed Sacrament in adoration. In those moments Jesus might have spoken to her and made her feel his call, his invitation. Often she would request me: 'Help me to be good. Speak to me of Jesus. I am naugthy, I am disobedient: help me... One evening while I was paying a visit to the church, I felt the soft sound of some footsteps approaching me and then a gentle touch on my shoulders. It was Rina. In a sobbing tone she told me: 'I feel bad, I have disobeyed my spiritual Father and he sent me away saying that he would not assume the responsibility of my soul!' It was shortly after the marriage of one of her brothers. As a rule these festivities would end with a ball for the invitees. Her spiritual Father had forbidden her to take part in these dances. Though she had agreed not to participate, she failed to keep

her promise. This displeased her confessor. I tried to calm and console her saying to go back to her spiritual Father and promise that she would do better in future. After a few days she returned to the Father and all was well again".

"How much she loved her missionary brothers" continues Carolina, "How she longed to follow them to India in order to work together with them for the salvation of souls ! She prayed and offered sacrifices for them. But she felt that what she was doing for them was but too little a price to be payed for such a sublime work. Not satisfied with her ordinary prayers and penances, with the permission of her spiritual Father, she used to tie a cord with many knots around her waist so tightly as to cause bleeding. This mortification would make her happy, because she thought that in this way she would help her brothers in their apostolate." From this relation from her teacher and leader we gather that Rina had gone a good way forward in her spiritual life. But this is not all.

Beautiful Sunday

Sundays and Feast-days were real landmarks in her increase in piety and love of God. She would look forward to them with relish and prepare herself for them with enthusiasm. There was naturally the joy of the feast, which every Christian experiences in celebrating the mysteries of the Lord, but this joy was achieved by Rina through a thorough preparation. There was infallibly the Saturday evening or Vigil Reconciliation as the climax to this preparation, which would always be preceded by nosegays, special prayers and little acts of self-denial. Already as an adolescent and then as a young woman she had kept to the practice of spiritual direction. Besides the saintly and stern direction of the parish priest, Mgr. J. M. Stefanini, she would approach a Professor of

Theology for guidance, who would come weekly for the confessions at the parish church to help the parish priest in the Saturday and Sunday ministry.

Her spiritual preparation for the liturgical celebrations could be evidenced also by little external acts of devotion. Together with other companions of the Catholic Action and the Marian Sodality, Rina would keep herself busy with the decoration of the altars. Every Saturday and Feast-vigil she would clean the Sanctuary and the altars, prepare the flower-pots and vases both at the main and side-altars; but a special touch was noticed at the altar of Our Lady. For this reason she had kept a separate portion of the flower garden at home, precisely for the church. When the flowers at home would not be enough, she would go begging for them from the neighbouring families. Sometimes it was only a pretext for exercising her apostolic zeal, for speaking to those families about God, their religious practices, the necessity of going frequently to church and to the sacraments. Often she would go even purposely to certain people whom she knew were keeping far from their religious duties.

Several times the parish priest would request her to go to certain people with whom he himself had failed. This would happen especially during Easter season, when certain persons needed to be reminded of their Easter duties. What was wonderful in her was the smiling way she would invite people, sometimes cracking jokes and often even offering her services, especially to the help of women, who would not be able to leave the home because they had small children. In any case she would not move from the house until she would get at least a promise that the approached person would agree to her suggesions. Once a gentlemen told her: "Well, since it is you who ask it, I will surely go to Mass next Sunday. But you

must promise me that you will come to see us again." She would be only too happy to agree to that, because that would afford her even greater opportunities for doing more apostolate.

Care for the little ones

About this period of the life of Sr. Rina, her brother, Fr. Luciano says: "I remember that the court-yard of our house and the place in front of it used to be the get-together venue of the boys and girls of the nieghbourhood. Very often the young people from other parts of the town would come to play there or sing our beautiful country choral songs, especialily in Summer. Whenever Rina could be present she would heartly take part in the singing. She would also see that the games would not turn into quarrels and fights, but above all she would make sure that in no way the offence of God would take place. How many times I was called away by her when she feared some sort of spiritual or physical danger to me".

"In particular I remember a little episode about her attention and care. I was about ten years old then. On one occasion I was accused by people of the locality of a fault they seemed to consider great. Although I was fully innocent of the whole affair, they kept on scolding me and threatening that they would tell everything to my mother and so on. Rina too came to hear about it and running to me she pleaded: 'Ciano, I am sure you did not do what they accuse you of. Tell me you didn't do anything of the sort.' I remember staring at her in bewilderment sincerely not knowing what she or they ever meant. All that I could utter was a plain 'no'. In joy she hugged me to herself and said with relief: 'I knew you wouldn't do that. Come let's go home. Mummy will not know anything about it".

"On another occasion," Fr. Luciano continues, "While we were at games, a youngman was heard saying something improper. She looked at me and then gazing at him seriously she shouted: 'Stop it !' and then in a subdued voice she said to him again: 'Never say such words in front of children.' She had great influence over young people, even over youngmen above her own age. She would use that power to stop disputes, bad talk, envy and the like. Often she would invite them to prayer and to good behaviour. During one of his home visits Fr. Luciano took the liberty to ask his friends what impression Sr. Rina had left in them when she was at home before going to the convent. They unanimously agreed that she had a peculiar way of dealing with them and that it was difficult to turn a deaf ear to her when she asked or suggested some good turn.

God comes first

Rina was surely a soul who fully belonged to God. Her daily encounter with Jesus in Holy Communion offered her the opportunity of renewing daily her commitment to him. Besides, as we have seen, her only ambition was to love him and make him loved by others. On the other side her attractive character drew everyone to her. She understood the subtle danger hidden in the affection of people. So she doubled her efforts to remain even closer to God and to make use of the esteem of others to lead them also to him.

Here is a striking fact to prove this statement. A certain priest, who died recently as a good Salesian told Fr. Luciano that if he was a priest and a Salesian he owed it to the zeal and disinterested love of Sr. Rina. He was only two years older than she and he used to be a frequent visitor to their place, as many other young people were. Attracted by her

good behaviour, he had taken a liking to Rina, which developed into love. Rina noticed and understood it. So one day calling him aside she told him politely and frankly: 'Peter, you know it very well that I am going to be a Sister and so how foolish is your way of behaving towards me.' The youngman protested: 'Rina, tell me that you are not going to the convent, and I'll do everything you ask of me.' "Really?" inquired Rina, "then listen: I shall remain home now, but then you



yourself will have to go to the Salesians. Within three months my brother Joseph will come from Ivrea (the Salesian missionary house for aspirants) to go to the missions. What about your going with him?" There was along pause, after which Peter replied: "Well, let me think about it....." He did think a lot about it. The same year he entered the house of

aspirants in Ivrea. When Peter left home Rina asked him to pray that she too may quickly be able to follow her vocation.

Involved in the local Church

Rina belonged to a family of hard workers. Her brothers and sisters would not spare themselves when work in the fields demanded their presence there. Yet somehow she could not adapt herself to that hard work. Was it because of an early illness which did not allow her to do hard work or because of her inclination to work rather in the parish with the permission of her parents, which she thought her duty to do? The fact is that she was excellent at household tasks and expert at running errands for anybody.

She used to be ever at the beck and call of the Nuns, the Parish Priest and the Catholic Action leaders, for which she would often be rebuked by her people at home. The rebukes would not die there. In fact they reached even to the ears of the parish priest, who would rather stand for her and say to her parents: "Do not tie her wings down. She is called by God to soar, so let her fly.....You at home will not be the loosers for it." The saintly parish priest, an experienced guide of souls, knew her very well and had foreseen her vocation, which he was trying to encourage and nurture in all possible ways, especially by guiding her to active apostolate.

No category of people escaped Rina's apostolic influence, but her predilection was for the young and particularly for the girls in the parish. All through her life she left the impression in everybody that she was a born Salesian. "Her greatest interest," says again Fr. Luciano, "was for the girls in the parish. She was an active group-leader in the Catholic Action and an animator of the Sodality of the Children of Mary.

Her interest for these Associations was immense. She would always be present at the meetings and other activities of these apostolic groups. She would be seen continually surrounded by girls and young women, whom she would encourage in the path of virtue.

"It was common to see her together with some of her companions going from house to house to circulate Christian literature, to meet other girls or their mothers in their homes in order to encourage them to collaborate with the parish initiatives and the like. But the activity which she loved most was to teach catechism. Through this wonderful apostolate she would put enthusiasm in the young minds and hearts to love God and neighbour in a cheerful way, to frequent the sacraments and to be of good example to other children, who would not come to religious instruction. She made use of the confidence the young had placed in her to guide them and to help them in following their religious or priestly vocation. How many among the young could confide that they had her encouragement and if they are now religious or priests they owe it also to her. I personally owe her so much in following my own vocation."

A kind heart

One may sincerely ask what was the source of Rina's success with the children and the young, even from her earlier years. The answer is easy enough: it is what many could affirm without being afraid of being wrong, because they experienced it themselves: it was her good generous heart. We shall see that easily proved in later years. We could quote only a few anecdotes of this time.

As we have seen before, together with her brothers and

sisters she would often accompany her father to fairs and pilgrimages. On these happy occasions she could not forget some of her more needy friends. She would ask her father to give a lift to one or two of such companions, who would never have the opportunity to go to such places unless they would have been taken in by some kind friend. On one such occasion it happened that there was really no place in the conveyance. "Well, she said, if really there is no place for both of us, please take my companion with you. I have been to the fair so many times, but she may have no other opportunity." Such genuine generosity called for admiration and also for... an extra place in the cart, even at the inconvenience of others !

Another episode may illustrate her kind heart. As we have noted earlier, Rina did not have the knack for work in the fields, but this did not prevent her to be at the service of the brothers and the workers in the fields. She would readily undertake the equally arduous work of preparing the meals and bringing them to the workers in the place of their work. Once due to the fact that she could not have the cycle as she hoped, she was late to bring the food in time to the fields. Needless to say she was showered with rebukes. She took no offence at that. She understood she was in the wrong and readily accepted the penalty. After having calmly apologised for her fault she quickly went about dishing out the meal to the workers. She did it with so much joy and good will that she even forgot to keep aside her own share. When she was asked why she did not take her meal with them, she just added that she was so delighted to see them all eat with so much relish that this was to her the best meal.

This would be the right place to quote what Gemma, her younger sister, had to say about the generous disposition of her heart:" I think Rina learnt to be so good-hearted from our

mother, who could not just bear to see people in need or in some difficulty without coming to their help. When she would come to know of any such neighbours, she would call us and hand over to us a bag containing food-stuff or the like and tell us to bring that secretly to such a person or family. Rina would jump at the proposal and she would run the errand on her old cycle. Perhaps these little actions of charity were often even suggested by her to our mother."



4. Entrance into Religion

As years went on — Rina is now fifteen — she began to feel a growing need for silence and solitude. Despite her vivacious character, she felt a tremendous need to be with Jesus in close intimacy, especially after her Holy Communion. She wanted to dedicate all the time available to prayer and meditation: this is evidenced by the long time she would spend in church, in her visits to the Blessed Sacrament. She was equally intimate with Our Blessed Lady, whom she loved with filial tederness. She would run to Our Lady especially to ask for light on her vocation.

"I remember," says Fr. Luciano, "that on one occasion we had gone for a fair at the shrine of the Madonna di Rosa (a place some five kilometres from our native town). While

everybody else had gone to see the fair, she called me apart and asked me to accompany her to the Shrine of Our Lady to pray and say the Rosary. She said she needed a special grace from our Blessed Mother. I was then eleven years old, she was sixteen. Was she then asking our Lady to know and to be able to follow her vocation? or was she asking this grace for me?.....The fact is that this very same year I joined the house for aspirants to the Salesian Congregation in Ivrea while she joined the aspirantate of the Daughter of Mary Help of Chistians at Arignano, one year six months later.

The call of Good

In this connection one may find it puzzling to know that Rina had decided at an early stage in her life to become Religious and yet she found it difficult to follow definitely her vocation. Many ascetical reasons can be produced to prove that this is commonly happening to persons, who are called to a life of perfection in religion. But not excluding the possibility of such reasons and difficulties, we can refer to what Fr. Luciano would like to say about this apparent delay. "I would not be in a position to state what were exactly the reasons that made Rina delay to join the convent. She often spoke of her unworthiness for such a great call. She found herself not mature enough for such a momentous decision. Besides, I know, there were difficulties at home at the time. But perhaps it might have been due to her inability to see clearly which congregation she would join. In our native town the Sisters of Divine Providence were well known: it was a local congregation. Rina was in very friendly, nay I may say, in very intimate terms with these sisters. In fact all her free time was spend with them and many a time she had been invited by them to join their congregation as several other compa-

nions of hers had joined. She used to spend hours in prayer in their convent chapel especially on feast-days.

"But God had called her to be a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians and so against all calculations and suppositions, she joined this Institute. "After God's call one of the reasons for this preference," says again Fr. Luciano, "was that three of her brothers were already belonging to Don Bosco as missionaries in India. In fact she herself had encouraged me to precede her to Turin to begin my apirantate with the Salesians, assuring me that she would follow me soon."

After much prayer, plenty of reflection and advice from her parents and superiors, many sacrifices and difficulties, she realized that she had to act. The time was ripe for her to realize her cherished dream: to live for God alone and for the good of souls. But it was not that easy. She had to leave her parents, brothers and sisters, her friends and relatives, her dear companions and those who had helped her and whom she had helped. She had to say good-bye to her native-place, the beautiful church and all that this meant, the convent and the school and all the wonderful native environment. Everything meant so much to her. And yet above everything else the words of the Master were ringing in her heart: "Come, follow me. Anyone who prefers father and mother....is not worthy of me." Hence no matter how heart-rending would be the separation, she decided to give everybody and everything the good-bye.

Farewell !

In April 1936 she left Casarsa for the house of aspirants of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians at Arignano in Piedmont, a place over 500 kilometres away. The crowd

of relatives, friends and especially the groups of the aspirants of Catholic Action that thronged the station to bid her adieu proved well enough how much she was known and loved in the town. As the train left, smiling Rina kept on waving her hand in response to the farewell wishes of all these people. It was only for a short time: she could not endure it any longer. Hastily she withdrew to her place to hide her face with her hand, as large drops of tears rolled down her cheeks.

... Arignano, an enchanting place of solitude in the country where once Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello had lived. This was enough to have Rina exclaim with the psalmist: 'One single day in your courts, O Lord, is worth more than a thousand elsewhere.' Yet for all this, Rina could not help feeling home-sick: possessing a very sensitive heart, she felt tremendously the impact of the sweet memories of home and friends.

But at the same time she was fully aware of the step she had taken and of the words of the Lord: "No one putting the hands to the plough and looking back is worthy of me." She had repeated those very words a few days before, when on her way to Arignano she had gone to see her brother Luciano, at his house for aspirants in Ivrea. In the course of their conversation, she had spoken to him about the beauty and greatness of the religious and priestly vocation, with such conviction and eloquence, that he felt within himself a love for his vocation that he never felt before. So it is not surprising that despite all her homesickness, she fitted herself perfectly to her new environment. In fact for the expansive and enthusiastic Rina there could not have been a better place to start her religious formation than the house of Arignano.

A new home

There reigned a homely atmosphere in that home and serene peace and joy pervaded the whole life. Though the rule of silence demanded a check on her, yet there was room enough for hearty laughter, lively games and innocent jokes. Prayer and study too had their right place and portion. Everything seemed just what Rina would have desired. And so, within a relatively short time, she felt completely at home. The family spirit that reigned in the house, as St. John Bosco's spiritual legacy to his daughters, conquered Rina's heart,—a heart which longed so much for it.

Rina enjoyed every instant of this new life, although she and her companions had to work day in and day out in the kitchen, in the laundry, in the garden and in the orchards which included a large vine-yard and a dark log-room. Of course there was the scheduled time for prayer and study, the time for recreation and silence. Rina made sure to accomplish all her duties punctually and precisely, yet always with the simplicity and the freedom of the children of God.

Among the many companions that made Rina feel at home, there excelled the young Virginia Marchetti, a slim figure of gentle and kind character. The two enjoyed being together from that time on for good nine years, until their assignment as missionaries in India, where only they parted one for the North and one for the South. Both were lively, active and hard-working, both were enthusiastic and energetic, pious and zealous. Let us hear about those days from Sr. Virginia Marchetti, who up to some time ago has been Provincial of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the Province of North India.

"I came to have my first contact with Sr. Rina in 1937.

We were both new aspirants at Arignano-Turin. I was at once taken up by her big smile and jovial ways. Both of us were of the same age, full of life, energy and also fervour. One day we were sent to saw logs of chest-nut. Though we knew we had to keep silence during work, being new we had so many things to tell each other of our families, country, place, parish and what not. After finishing our work we felt uneasy and humbly went to accuse ourselves of our fault to the Superior, just to hear from that understanding Mother: "Ah, I know, I know, I know: it's all home-sickness for the birth-place! Be at peace."

"On another occasion while passing through the orchard, in her utter simplicity, Rina plucked some fruits from the trees and distributed them to her companions. It seemed to her so very natural: she had done it so very often at home. Wasn't this her new home? So if she had the right to do it at home, why not here too? Unfortunately not everybody is as simple, spontaneous and broad-minded. Consequently she was severely reprimanded by her assistant and Rina felt it keenly. As a reaction to that incident she promised she would not do that again and also that, if she ever would be in charge of girls and Sisters she would be more understanding and gentle with them."

She meets Mother Mazzarello

It was during this time that she began to fall in love with the Saintly Co-foundress of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, Mother Mazzarello. She had heard before of St. John Bosco, but now she came to understand that Mother Mazzarello was to her a much more imitable example of sanctity than Don Bosco: there was so much of similarity in her life with the life of Mother Mazzarello. Her love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, her tender affection for Mary

and her unbounded love for girls were so akeen that she felt her as compelling force in her progress to goodness.

After her fervent time of prayer and recollected study, Rina waited eagerly for the time of relaxation and games. Quite agile and active, she would easily be first everywhere. But nowhere as much as in time of recreation. There she would be at the goal-post as ready and alert as a sentinel: with her at her place her side would look forward to victory.



Thus in the midst of fun and facts, hard work and joyous recreations combined with a pleasant prayer life, time passed quickly and soon the time came for her to recieve the cape and medal of the postulant. This meant another parting: on 29th January 1958 she and her companions would have to leave Arignano for the new house. In this case it was Casa Madre Mazzarello in Turin. Rina by now understood that every place can become a home, if we make the effort to have it so. So from the start she felt happy in the new house. Here too she had her companion Sr. Virginia Marchetti.

Everybody came to know them because of their availability to any job at any odd hour. The superiors could entrust them with any work and be sure that things would go on well. Here they had the enviable joy of feeling the motherly presence and care of the fifth Mother General, Mother Angela Vespa, then Provincial of the Central Province.

The postulancy was a period of time spent in knowing the Institute so as to be able to enter the novitiate better prepared and acquainted with the disciplinary demands of that very regular life.

Novitiate

When the term of the postulancy ended, on 27th July 1938 Rina and her companions had to bid farewell to Madre Mazzarello House and as Mother Marchetti remarks: "Somewhat frightened we went to the old Cistercian Monastery at Casanova (Carmagnola), which had become our novitiate." After a retreat of ten days, on 5th August 1938 Rina and her novitiate companions recieved their religious habit during a stirring ceremony which in those days preceded their vestition. All candidates dressed as brides would approach the altar in a solemn procession. Then after having made a solemn promise of total renunciation of all that the world can offer, they would go and lay aside their bridal dress and return with their blessed habit. This casting away of the bridal habit and the subsequent substitution with the coarse plain habit of religion, had a very impressive significance for both the new novices and the on-lookers, especially the relations of the new novices. Rina was no exception, she fully grasped what this tearing herself from the world meant and what the new habit was telling her: she felt she had to belong completely to Christ and the years of her novitiate had to prepare her for this.

Once in the novitiate Rina vied with her companions in the practice of the Rules, which had been presented to them at the altar. They had made their choice and now it was up to them to prove that they were going to live according to the pattern of life they were going to embrace. Mother Marchetti again relates: "We were a battalion of forty three young ladies and soon Sr. Innocente Borzini realized how much she had to do to get us to silence and religious discipline. She used to call us 'the noisy battalion", which in the course of two years she changed in the generous battalion."

Relating some episodes about Sr. Rina, Mother Machetti says: "One day Sr. Rina, always very fond of games, was seen standing alone during recreation. I approached her and asked why she was not playing. The sad answer was: 'How can I run about when my petticoat is so tight that every time I play it 'tears away.' It happened that the assistant, seeing that her petticoat was tearing, made Sr. Rina mend it over and over again, until it became for her impossible to walk. Obedient Rina would rather sacrifice even her dear recreation than cause displeasure to her assistant."

About recreation and games here is an amusing and edifying fact related by Sr. Rina herself. In the first days of the novitiate the novices did not yet grasp the decorum demanded by the religious state, especially during games. As soon as as time came for the recreation Rina as usual would run for her preferred place, the goal-post, all tense with the excitement of the game. The then Mother Provincial happened to be there and was watching the scene. At the climax of the game she clapped the hands and made sign to Rina to leave the goal and the ball alike. Disappointed and mortified she left the place. "I understood," says Sr. Rina, "what my Superior meant, and that was the end of my most

cherished game. For somebody else this would have meant very little, but for the games-loving Rina it was a sacrifice worth its name.

Success crowns efforts

Sr. Rina's novitiate days will remain remarkable especially for the great efforts that she put in eradicating from her all traces of defects and in implanting those virtues which are the precious characteristics of Don Bosco's spriritiuality. "Sr. Rina as a novice," says Mother Marchetti, "was the friend of all, loved by all, because she loved everybody. She had a special quality of being of consolation to any companion, who for some reason or other would feel dejected. She simply could not bear the sight of anybody being unhappy. In those occasions she would invent anything to make people happy. "As for work," continues Mother Marchetti, "she was looking always for the heavier one. It is true she had a strong constititution, yet what we admired in her was her availability for anything."

Her piety was simple and child-like. What she strived at most was to acquire a habit of meditation and prayerful reflection. To this end she had asked the help of Mother Mistress, also because during meditation she was subject to moments of drowsiness. Mother Mistress would keep her near and when needed she would give her a shake. But for a time the Mistress had recourse to a drastic measure to help Rina keep alert. During meditation time she placed Rina facing the community in the front bench. It might have helped her no doubt, but it was surely something very humiliating. Yet she never got offended for that. "Not to feel offended at correction recieved is no doubt no small virtue. But Sr. Rina went even further, on noticing someone resenting

corrections. she would say: "My dear, be clever: the correction will pass, but the merit of it will remain."

As regards humility we may add something more referred to by Mother Marchetti as pertaining this time of the novitiate, "Though very clever", she says, "Sr. Rina never had a liking for much study. In the second year of our novitiate we were supposed to appear for the public exams as teachers: on such occasions, she would come to ask for help with great humility. I can add that Sr. Rina's company was sought by all. Wherever she was, joy and peace would reign there. Her love for the little children was unique. At the time some of them were brought to school at 6.30 a.m. and were taken home only at 7.30 p.m. by their parents on their returning from work. But these little children felt fully at home with Sr. Rina, who would care for them all that time."

Habit and habits

It may be good to relate here an incident narrated by Fr. Luciano: "After my vestition before coming to the missions I went to Sr. Rina at their novitiate house in Casanova. When she saw me in my cassock for the first time, she rushed to embrace me and deeply moved she said: 'I have been praying for all these months of my novitiate so that you may be able to wear this habit. You are going to the missions now. Poor boy (I was only fifteen at the time). I feel ashamed of myself—you are so generous at this young age as to go to work with our brothers there in India. (At the time Fr. Ferruccio and Fr. Guido were in India. Fr. Joseph had just returned to Italy sick from there). Be sure I will be following you as soon as my superiors will allow me. Promise that you will pray for me so that I may follow you to the missions".

"In order to come to see her," continues Fr. Luciano, "I had to cycle to their place through a very dusty road. On noticing dust on the cassock she began to clean it saying: 'It is the holy habit of a priest, it must always be clean.' And then on hearing that I had not had my meal yet, she ran to the kitchen and in no time she brought a well prepared meal, during which I was introduced to Sister Superior. We would have seen again later on after seven years, in India."

During the second year of the novitiate the tragic event of the Second World War broke out in Europe and later on in Italy. It had terrible repercussions on everybody, as all of us know. Sr. Rina was not little affected by it, as we shall see later on. During the novitiate days with the rise to tensions outside it, religious fervour grew within those walls. As dangers and prices shot up outside, the prayers and sacrifices increased considerably among the novices. How could it be otherwise? Apart from the anxiety of self-preservation, there was the preoccupation for the safety of their dear ones at home and at the front, and the war news troubled also the religious in their convents. Yet in the face of these disasters the novices were taught to brighten up their spirits in the firm conviction that there is a Father in Heaven who controls and conducts everythings for the good of his children. There was also the unfailing belief in the protection of Don Bosco's Madonna, who always stood as a help to those who trusted in her. Thus despite the perils of the war, in the novitiate everything went on according to scheduled programmes up to the decisive climax, the religious profession.

First Profession

5th August 1940. Enthusiasm grew to excitement as Sr. Rina and her companions waited eagerly for the dawn of that

day. They longed to be consecrated totally to the Lord and to belong to him entirely. Now that auspicious event was about to be accomplished. In the midst of a host of relatives and friends, superiors and well-wishers, as songs and lights accompanied them, they walked courageously to the altar, where they knelt to pronounce their 'fiat'. Sr. Rina was visibly moved as she read out the words of her profession. From that day onward she would be only for Jesus and for souls according to the charism of the Father and Founder, St. John Bosco, and the wonderful example of the Co-foundress, St. Mary Mazzarello.

Often during her life she would think of this glorious day of her profession to remind herself of her commitment: she would feel so happy and strengthened everytime she would recall to mind her own generosity at the moment of her profession.



5. In the Lord's Vineyard

After her profession Sr. Rina was assigned to the house of Madre Mazzarello in Turin. Mother Virginia Marchetti, from whom we have most of the particulars of her life during this period, was also with her. In holy friendship they continued to work courageously in the path of perfection by offering themselves to any form of work and apostolate to which obedience would call them. "Sr. Rina was entrusted with the running of the Kindergarten school, where she did enormous good both for the children and their parents". So says Mother Marchetti and she continues: "Many of the parents would come to confide their troubles and difficulties to her. She knew very well how to console them and to help them to find a solution to their problems. We have to keep in mind that this is already the second year of the war. One may imagine

the panic and problems that would exist in such circumstances. To many she gave much help and found work to gain their daily bread."

Mother's death

In the year 1941, in the midst of the horrors of the war, the Lord asked Sr. Rina for yet another proof of her love and loyalty. One morning suddenly she got the shocking news of her mother's fatal illness. Her superiors immediately granted her permission to go and see her mother. She rushed to her bedside. With great tenderness and love Sr. Rina nursed and assisted her. She knew only too well what her mother had meant to them all. Mother had spent a life of love and service for all the members in the family and now she was worn out by a life of dedication.

Sr. Rina would have liked now to repay her with love and affection for whatever she had received from her. In spite of her desire to stay on, religious discipline demanded from her the sacrifice of parting from her mother. With a heart torn to pieces by pain and sorrow she returned to the convent with the premonition of her mother's impending death. In fact, in a few days her saintly mother left us for heaven to receive her well-deserved reward. The pain of that terrible separation weighed down on Sr. Rina's heart. In future she even felt guilty of not remaining with her mother at her death-bed saying: "Perhaps it was my pride of keeping the rule to return soon to the convent that hastened mother's death. The letter kills, the spirit enlivens." She courageously tried to overcome her sorrow in her contact with others. In no way did she want others to feel the weight of her burden. So within a considerably short time, she returned to normal life and continued to play her part of spreading joy in the Sisters' community and among the children entrusted to her care.

During the Second World War

In 1942 the war became more violent. "For a few months," writes Mother Marchetti, "no one remained in Madre Mazzrello's House for fear of the continual bombing over the city of Turin by the allies. Then five courageous Sisters were sent to guard the big empty house: among them were Sr. Rina and myself. Those were heroic days, always face to face with death: we could have died any moment after a bombing under a collapsing wall or in the open grounds. In the house there was no heater and the cold was biting.

"On Christmas night we managed to have Mass in our chapel. Dear Sr. Ferrero, our Superior, was at the harmonium and the other four of us sang in four parts with all the fervour and the enthusiasm that we could possibly muster in. After Mass rolled up in our big cloaks, which helped us somehow to fight the cold, we went to the almost empty kitchen. There was not the usual big pot steaming with the hot cocoa drink, nor was there the panettone or white wine as was the custom. Everywhere we could read the awful consequences of the war, Sr. Rina tried to cheer us up by starting in her base voice 'Tra l'orrido rigor..."(In the horrible cold of that winter night, Our Saviour Babe was born.) We really were not in the mood to sing the hymn, but we did sing it all the same to our own consolation. It all helped us to enjoy even that miserable Christmas Night, which we reckoned poor in external show, but surely rich in spiritual experiences. We felt we were even better off than Our divine Saviour who did not have a big shelter nor warm cloak, nor a fine mattress as we had.

"In those awfully trying months and years, " adds Mother Marchetti, "there were days which were more gloomy than usual. One evening all of us were in very depressed spirits.

Sr. Rina wanted to react. She took a large Rosary, put it around her neck and covered by her big mantle and a pillow-case in the form of a Capuchin's hood she went about saying louder and louder: "I am sad...I am very sad...I am horribly sad..." The whole scene brightened up in a moment and instead of feeling sad and depressed, we began to roll with laughter. Sr. Rina had got the better of the situation: her jovial spirit would never stand a melancholy atmosphere.

"But she would have much more in stock for us. In the midst of the incessant hootings of the siren and the bursting sounds of bombs, one could not help calling for assistance to heaven, and there was Sr. Rina often heard to call out 'Jesus, mercy!' (There was a plenary indulgence for it in those occasions). 'Lord, keep us today in your love and care'. Those were not only days of gloom and fear, hardship and poverty, but also days of killing labour. When the day was drawing to a close we only looked forward to throw our tired limbs anywhere provided we could get some rest. Many times in the evening Sr. Rina would entreat the superior to please intone soon the 'Miserere', because otherwise she would fall asleep even while standing. In those insecure, uncertain nights we would go to sleep fully dressed, because sirens might hoot at any moment and then we would have had to run for our own safety and also to the rescue of others."

Heroic days

During those terrible years evacuation was the order of the day. The 'all clear' signal would be followed by the rush of people from place to place with bag and baggage carrying as much as they could. Those who had evacuated during the night, would go in search of work during the day. The factory-owners would request the Sisters to prepare the food for these

labourers. The Sisters could not refuse such requests, firstly, because charity and circumstances demanded it, and secondly, because their own position necessitated it. Sr. Rina with her companions would be slogging from morning till evening to reach everybody.

In the course of time a few more Sisters were added to their number, because of the excessive work. As late as 11. p.m. they would be still up cutting and cleaning vegetables and preparing meal for the following day. The next day the batch of Sisters would be seen going to the factories distributing food to the workers. But together with the food they would help them keep up the morale and faith in God, so much needed in those trying months. One may imagine the condition of the minds of those workers, who had either lost some dear person of their family or lost their houses and property. "Sr. Rina," says Mother Marchetti, "knew how to share in the sufferings of others."

However in spite of all the display of vigour and good-will to do even more, Sr. Rina fell victim to a queer malady and was forced to take to bed.

Sr. Superior and the other Sisters would visit her often, but found her always asleep. When food was taken to her, she would eat with surprising appetite, but hardly had she taken the food than she would fall again into deep sleep. As things were going in this way for quite a few days, the Sisters thought of calling in a doctor. But where to find one then? As fears increased, one day Sr. Rina just got up perfectly well and started off to her usual duties. They all came to the conclusion that her malady was nothing else than complete exhaustion: strain and over-work had broken down even her iron

physique until she collapsed. The previous day in fact she had been carrying up the stairs bags and furniture from morning to evening.

"Towards the end of 1943 events turned to be more favourable and we resumed some of our works: the oratory and some classes. It seemed to us that a new world had started, though bombings were still not out of count." "One day", continues Mother Marchetti, "Sr. Rina and two other Sisters were up in the theatre-hall to prepare for the oratorians. Suddenly the siren went and to avoid the breaking of the window-panes they wanted to go to open the windows of the school. Sr. Superior called out to them and ordered them to run to the protected place. Blessed were they for having obeyed promptly ! No sooner had they come under safety than there fell three bombs near our premises destroying the house to which we wanted to go, playing havoc in the neighbourhood. Immediately Sr. Rina exclaimed: 'Let us learn to obey always.' "

Connected with the difficult days of the post-war period, a little episode is related again by Mother Virginia Marchetti in which we see Sr. Rina's burning love for souls and her filial devotion to Our Blessed Mother. "We were preparing for the Novena of the Immaculate Conception, and our aspirants and children of Mary found it difficult to come to early Mass. Sr. Rina, a great lover of Our Lady, could not think of letting the Novena pass without having the girls attend Mass. As human means were found inefficacious, her zeal deviced a wise plan and she approached me saying: "Sr. Virginia, we need to do some penance: both of us shall sleep with our wooden shoes on for the whole night with the intention that the Lord touch the minds and hearts of our girls and so many come for the novena. The following day many girls did come



Rina at 16, before leaving home



Sr. Rina after her first profession



Sr. Rina with parents and priest brothers



Sr. Rina at Casa Madre Mazzarello

for the morning Mass. Needless to add that both of us the the previous night did not (could not) close an eye."

New fervour

The cessation of the Second World War and the subsequent return of peace announced the dawn of a new era. It seemed as if a new world had began to function again. Everywhere a feverish activity for reconstruction could be seen and with it a mutual desire for help and harmony among men was the harbinger of better days for the future. At the House Madre Mazzarello too new life was coming. The forthcoming return of the Sisters called for great preparation in the house. "Sr. Rina and myself," writes again Mother Marchetti, "were among the strongest of the Sisters, and so the heaviest portion of the work fell upon us. All the suit-cases had to be carried from the cellars to the attics. A full day of uninterrupted loading and unloading would break down all our energy: we actually rolled down the stairs now and again because of sheer inability to climb up any longer."

But the joy of having back the Sisters together and starting a regular community life, after so many days of uncertainties and irregularity would spur them to any possible work. Once life resumed its normality, Sr. Rina went back to her assigned task at the kindergarten and the oratory for the girls of the neighbourhood. Her work at the oratory was unparallelled. After the example of Mother Mazzarello, whom she tried to imitate especially on this virtue, she loved the girls immensely. And the girls understood that very well: so they would be ready to do anything she requested of them. Sr. Rina was in charge of the "Garden of Mary." At 1.00 noon the girls would already be at the gate clamouring for her. She would go to them and spend the entire afternoon

up to 7.30 p.m. in their company singing, praying, playing and catechizing.



"Once for some reason," says Mother Marchetti, "Sr. Superior changed Sr. Rina to another group of oratorians. That Sunday there was a chaos at the oratory. Her former group (a vociferous one in fact) went on shouting that they wanted Sr. Rina with them. And they were in for trouble..... Those girls (we are in the post-war time) really needed her. She knew them and she could handle them the way they needed."

Mother Marchetti continues: "What good Sr. Rina did in those seven years at Madre Mazzarello's house cannot be counted. Suffice it to say that the whole of Borgo San Paolo knew her: men and women, girls and boys and children. (She is still remembered there so much!) She followed her girls one by one: they had so much confidence in her that they would open themselves to her completely. At times she would even call on certain youngmen, enquire about certain situations, correct and encourage them to amendment, if that was required of them." The secret of her success with the young was her great love for God and her keen understanding of the mind of the youngsters.

Sr. Tilde Galli says about those days: "I was a postulant in the house Madre Mazzrello in 1947, I came to know Sr. Rina there for the first time. She was an exemplary religious, pious, cheerful. She loved her vocation enthusiastically and she communicated that enthusiasm to others too. She belonged to the choir and she sang beautifully in the group. She was a teacher at the school and incharge of the flourishing oratory where she was at her best. She was admired by her Superiors and Sisters. Yet during this time, as I learnt later on, she had had to suffer at the hands of one of her Sisters, due to divergence of opinion in their work. She approached her Superior about it often and she was told by her: "Sr. Rina, in such cases, the one who gives in comes out victorious. (Chi cede, vince.)" It became a golden rule for Sr. Rina for all her life . She gave in then and she gave in so many times in her life.....and she won!"

All for God alone

In the meantime the date of her Perpetual Profession was drawing near: nobody was so conscious of it as Sr. Rina

herself. All along those years of preparation for this greatest step in her life she had wondeful Superiors to guide her. There was great need of guidance and Sr. Rina admitted that, especially in view of the tremendous stress caused by those war and post-war years. These had been taxing for any one, but in particular for the Sisters at Madre Mazzarello House, in Turin. Anyone who knows what that promising yet difficult zone of Turin around Madre Mazzarello's was, will admit that one needed real virtue to pass through those circumstances. Sr. Rina was not an angel, unable to feel the pinch of temptation. Temptation for her came from the least expected corner: the popularity which she enjoyed with all the people of the area, in particular with the young. As she confided later on to one of her brothers she would offer that as her perpetual Profession gift to God through the hands of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

She made her perpetual Profession in the hands of Mother Elvira Rizzi on 5th August 1946 in that very house Madre Mazzarello, in which she had spent the youthful energies of her first six years of religious life. Literally hundreds of Sisters and Superiors and thousands of oratorians and people were present at the profession ceremony of that numerous batch of Sisters. There was a grand entertainment in honour of the perpetually professed of that day: Sr. Rina's name was almost jarringly over-repeated by her enthusiastic oratorians. When everything ended and calm once more came down on that busy Salesian bee-hive, Sr.Rina approached her Superior and handed over a sealed letter for Mother General: it was her application for the missions. "Ciano," she confided later on to Fr. Luciano, "that was to realize one of my dearest dreams. But it was also to escape from that silly popularity, which would have choked me during those first years of Salesian Apostolate."

And for others

"Sr. Rina," continues Mother Marchetti, "was in Madre Mazzarello's House from 1940 to 1947. Those years may be termed years of plenty, for in those years all the apostolic activities of the house flourished to unbelievable proportions. She had been all the time at the school and in the oratory: thus she came in contact with thousands of girls and people of all walks of life . The good she did to so many, will never be recounted exhaustively." Excerpts from a letter by Sr. Wanda Cardinale FMA fittingly sum up what could be said of this phase of the life of Sr. Rina: "I lived with Sr. Rina for several years in Madre Mazzarello House in Turin. She was enthusiastic, kind and open. She loved and appreciated her religious life and she was very scrupolous about religious discipline. She loved Our Lady very much: she would call her Mamma.

"She loved all her Sisters equally and she would do whatever she could to please them: she would even try to fosestall their wishes too. Good-hearted as she was, she would be all for her children, without forgetting their parents too, who would open their worries to her, since she would be able to understand them and comfort them.

"Many were the cases she would take care of: deaths of persons in the family, misunderstandings and quarrels at home, poverty and forgetfulness. She would be ready for all kind of works, especially the heaviest. She would help especially the weaker and suffering Sisters, because, she would say, she did not know what illness meant.

"Sr. Rina was good, good, good !"

"I still remember her"

We may conclude with an unsolicited witness of Mrs. Mercedes Maroglio, who writing to Fr. Guido in 1980 says: "I still remember very well your sister, Sr. Rina, who brought up my daughter at the Kindergarten in Madre Mazzarello House, 37 years ago. I remember her every night in my prayyers. I have still with me a picture of Our Lady, Help of Christians, signed by her. We love her so much ! She was as sweet as a Madonna and as good as an Angel."

When the same lady came to know that Sr. Rina's life-sketch was being prepared she wrote another letter thus: "About Sr. Rina I and my daughter still remember her tall figure and her dear and sweet face as that of Our Lady, Help of Christians, so full of goodness, that made people love her at first sight. When she would see a child entering the class-room with a hurt finger, she would at once call him aside and medicate the hurt. Sometimes my mother, myself and some of my friends would go to the kindergarten just to see her and to hear some good word from her...When we came to know that she would go to India, I would come to see her on Thursdays bringing along my three children, whom she would allow to play about in the parlour. She knew what the missions would be for her. She said that perhaps sometimes she might not even have the strength to hold a glass of water. And yet she chose to leave us, who loved her so much, and go to the missions...Yes, do write about her that she was as sweet as a Madonna and as good as an Angel!"



6. A Dream: The Missions

"Now the Lord said to Abraham, "Go from your country and kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Ge. 12.1). Like Abraham Sr. Rina had heard the Lord's invitation at a very early age when she had seen her missionary brothers leave their home and country in order to be heralds of Christ in India. Her desire to go to the missions grew in her with the years. Her dissappointment was great at the outbreak of the war which, she knew, would either hamper or completely prevent her from realizing her long cherished dream. With the declaration of peace there dawned in her heart fresh hopes of her setting sail for the missions. We have seen how earnestly she requested her Major Superiors for this favour.

God's will

In those days the Sisters who wished to go to the missions would submit their application to the superiors who alone would decide about the place to which they would go. When the public announcement was made to the Sisters regarding their mission fields, Sr. Rina came to know for the first time that she was assigned to the Middle East. One may well imagine her disappointment ! Everyone of her companions remonstrated, but Sr. Rina remained unmoved ! One thing alone mattered to her: THE WILL OF GOD. She would adhere to it at the cost of her very life. However, as soon as her missionary brother, Fr. Guido, came to know of Sr. Rina's assignment, he immediately appealed to the superiors for the favour of sending her to India. They gladly consented and Sr. Rina was re-appointed to India.

She was truly happy with the change. Yet when she came to learn that Fr. Guido was instrumental for such a change, she complained to him for not having allowed her to carry out fully God's adorable plan in her regard. Referring to this time, Mother Teresa Merlo, one time her provincial, and an important witness, writes: "I met Sr. Rina for the first time in Turin in 1947 when our Very Rev. Mother General, L. Lucotti, presented her to me as a gift for the Assam Mission saying: "By God's grace Sr. Rina will be a saintly and happy missionary. She will do lots of good. She is intelligent and pious."

Sr. Rina loved God and souls, but she loved also her country and relatives. One may well imagine what she felt when she had to say goodbye to her dear father, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends. The letters she wrote to them later regarding this parting, are not just scraps of newspaper,

but real heart to heart communications full of warmth and inspiration. One always feels like reading them again and again to capture the message of joy and goodness which Sr. Rina wanted to convey through them. It is good to note here that the interest and affection she expressed in her letters were in proportion to the needs of the persons to whom she would write.

How meaningful were her letters to her priest brothers, and how touching those to her sisters Gemma and Cecilia because of their difficulties in life! How affectionate her letters to her superiors! The Lord was waiting for her in India and she had to go. Among those whom she visited before leaving her native place was the confidant of her chilhood days, Miss Carolina Colussi, who writes: "When she came to bid me farewell before leaving for India, she found me in bed for a good ten days. Before leaving my bedside, she gave me a holy picture (which I still preserve) on which was written: "Carolina, at Jesus' feet thorns become roses, crosses become joys. It's sweet to suffer and a gain to die."

Towards India

In spite of the intensity of the pain of parting, the preparations went on as scheduled and soon the day arrived for the Sisters Missionaries to leave Turin and go to Genoa from where they would embark on 16th November 1947. While on the one hand the parting was heart-rending, on the other it was also elevating. There was the thrill of a great adventure ahead, there was the hope of the realization of the dream. So as the sight of their land became dimmer and dimmer, the prospects of a successful future became brighter and brighter. In this way the young missionaries overcome the nostalgia they felt. Among them Sr. Rina took it as her task of bringing joy to the group by her smile and jokes.

The leader of that batch of missionaries was Mother Mary Avio. Though Sr. Rina had seen and heard of her now and then, it was only during this voyage that she had the opportunity of getting acquainted with this authentic Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. They were quite different in temperament, yet they had things in common. Their close association enabled them to learn much about each other and soon Mother Avio found that she loved Sr. Rina with the understanding of a real mother, while Sr. Rina reciprocated with the veneration and attachment of a real daughter.

The journey was no doubt adventurous and long: the Suez Canal being closed, ships had to go round the Cape of Good Hope. They were to be heralds of Christ and so they had to prepare themselves for it. Hence they spent part of their time on board learning English. Mother Avio, who had been several years in England, where she had served that Province as Provincial, was the most appropriate teacher they could have had in acquainting themselves with English. Not only did they learn English from Mother Avio, they also acquired from her those traits of conducting themselves becomingly as required and expected of their Christian and religious vocation. In Mother Avio they saw a perfect pattern of a polished and saintly person.

Thus the days passed quickly and finally on 4th January 1948 they disembarked at Bombay. Oh, the thrill of that landing! They had now set foot on the land of their adoption. It seemed almost a dream that they were in India. They received a warm welcome from their Sisters already at work in Bombay. Among them they began to feel at home. After a short stay at Bombay the two groups left for their respective missions. Of the five from their batch, three, including Mother Avio, were to go to Madras, while Sr. Rina with her companion Sr. Stefanina Stefani were to proceed to Assam.

To Assam

The arrival of Sr. Rina and Sr. Stefanina, two more missionaries brimming with life, zeal and enthusiasm, caused no small rejoicing among the Sisters at St. Mary's Convent, Gauhati. These were the first arrivals after the war. As for the two of them, by now quite well-versed in the Salesian Spirit and apostolate, it did not take long to make themselves useful



to the community. Two incidents are related by two Sisters about Sr. Rina during her short stay at Gauhati. Sr. Nellie Nunes writes: "When I was at St. Mary's Gauhati I had the joy of meeting dear Sr. Rina during her first days of arrival in

Assam. We soon felt a mutual understanding which grew with years. My first impression of her was her predilection for youth. I understood this in a surprisingly clear way, when the day after her arrival, in spite of the happy exchange of news and welcome words at lunch time, she rose and excused herself saying that she would love to see the children at their meal. She went to them and just by smiling at them at once she made friends with them.

It was the time we had our first boarders at Sr. Mary's. Sr. Agnes Khurkalang too has something to say: "While Sr. Rina was being shown the convent and its surroundings, I happened to pass by. I was then a girl helping the sisters at Gauhati. Sr. Superior called me to them and said to Sr. Rina: 'You are going to work among her people.' When she first saw me, she expressed a dislike for the way I was dressed, our usual Khasi way. But as soon as she learnt that she was supposed to come to work among us, she said: 'If that's the case , I not only like this way of dressing, but I love it!"

Dear Jowai !

In India Sr. Rina's first appointment was to the house of Jowai, dedicated to the saintly Co-foundress, St. Mary Mazzarello. Gladly she welcomed her appointment and went to her destination—the Jaintia Hills of the present Meghalaya. On her way to Jowai, she stopped for a while at Sacred Heart Convent, Mawlai, to wish the Sisters there and also to prepare herself for the tough trip to Jowai: in those days there was no transport, the Sisters would go on foot. As in Gauhati, so also in Mawlai, Sr. Rina made a very good impression on all those who met her. Her tall well-built figure with her rosy cheeks and smile caught the eyes of everyone. She too was taken up by the lively jolly ways of the Khasi children and she began

to feel a special liking for the Khasis which she kept on throughout her life.

On her arrival at Jowai, she was met by some girls who could not control their eagerness and had walked more than a mile to welcome her. Here too all were soon enchanted by her appearance, her smile and her fascinating ways. Sr. Nerilla Mukhim says that they were almost spell-bound on seeing her. "The first Sunday after her arrival," she adds, "all the Sisters went for Mass to the Parish Church, leaving her alone with the girls. Being no stranger to deal with youngsters, she entertained us so well that now, nearly thirty seven years later, it's as if I still see the scene and hear the sound she made in drawing the curtains where there were none." Like our founder Don Bosco, she was very much gifted to deal with children to lead them to God.

In those days of scarcity in personnel and means, no one ever dreamt of having teachers and classes for the Sisters to learn the language. They had to throw themselves headlong into their hundred and one duties which kept them busy from morning till night. The well-known saying "Necessity is the mother of invention" or Don Bosco's words 'Throw them in the water and they will learn to swim' made them search out ways and means to make themselves efficient in their work: to learn the language and customs would come first.

In her efforts to learn Khasi, Sr. Rina was lucky to find an expert teacher in Sr. Josephine Gaod, who taught her the key sentences to the study of the same. In Rina's little notebook Sr. Josephine wrote the following sentence in Khasi "What do you call this?" This sentence became the basis of Sr. Rina's Khasi vocabulary. In a surprisingly short time,

Sr. Rina became quite fluent in Khasi and could make herself fit for any work where language was indispensible. Sr. Agnes Khurkalang and Sr. Nerilla attest that in one year's time Sr. Rina began to translate Italian playets and dramas into Khasi. In learning languages we ought to give her the credit she deserves for her constancy, courage, enthusiasm and a very strong will-power; at the bottom of all these lies her unflagging zeal for souls . More than anything else it is this virtue alone that enabled her to master with ease and speed the languages of the places she was sent to.

"My girls are my treasure"

With seven years of experience in Italy and with her ever-ready zeal even before entering the Institute, Sr. Rina was fully prepared to be entrusted with any work. So, she helped in the school as much as her knowledge of the language permitted her; she assisted the boarders. What an assistant! One fully according to the heart of Don Bosco. She was also entrusted with her most favourite work—the Oratory. Undoubtedly it differed a lot from her Oratory at Turin. There the mere presence of Sr. Rina would ensure a flow of girls into the convent; instead, here the existing prejudices of the protestants against the Catholics caused a stumbling block. Yet here too Sr. Rina's presence made the oratory equally attractive as it had been in Italy.

In those days, nearly two decades before the Ecumenical Council, the relationship between the Catholics and our separated brethren was far from cordial. Both parties kept aloof from each other and the Presbyterians kept away the simple folk, who would have eagerly flocked to the Sisters' house. Inspite of all these obstacles, Sr. Rina's spirit of initiative and sincere love for children succeeded in getting a good number

of children, both boys and girls, into the oratory. Some of them would come in hiding, because they knew what would be their lot, if they had been seen by their elders. The love and care Sr. Rina bestowed on them remained so indelibly marked on their minds that these oratorians gratefully and lovingly remembered her even in later years.

When Mother Carolina Novasconi, one of the Major Superiors of the Sisters, visited India, she made it a point to visit every house. When she visited the house of Jowai, Sr. Rina, who always loved and revered her Superiors, vied with the Sisters to offer a fitting welcome to the distinguished guest. As the boarders and day scholars were arranged in the hall, Sr. Rina triumphantly placed her dear Oratorians in the front line. Some of them were quite ragged and dirty. Mother Carolina in her outspoken way remarked: "What dirty little children you have placed right in front, Sr. Rina!" Sr. Rina was taken aback by such a remark and only answered: "But these are our treasure!" Indeed she loved the poorest very much.

Life in the Missions

Poverty in those days was Mornese's poverty—lived with joy and simplicity. Being very active, Sr. Rina enjoyed the blessing of a wonderful appetite. But often she had to be satisfied with a plate of boiled sweet potatoes. At times when she asked for some more bread, good Sr. Superior, hiding her deep sorrow at not being able to provide it would wisely advise her saying: "Sr. Rina, sweet potatoes are much better and more nourishing."

The following episode happened on the occasion of Mother Carolina's visit to Jowai. She had known Sr. Rina's virtues and appetite during war time in Italy, when the Sisters

would leave their left-over pieces of bread for Sr. Rina, who would eat them with joy and relish. Sr. Rina had taken her lunch before the others since she had to assist the boarders. On her return to the refectory Mother asked: "Well, Sr. Rina I am sure you would not mind taking another plate of soup?" "Not at all, Mother." And she sat for the soup again without minding it, and...also for the rest of the meal!

For the sake of truth and as a well-deserved praise, it is good to point out that whatever their personal difficulties or restrictions, the Sisters have always welcomed and were very hospitable to visitors and guests. That very year Sr. Rina's brothers, Fr. Dino who had just come to India, and Fr. Luciano, had gone to Jowai to see their Sister. After a whole day's journey on foot from Shillong, tired and famished, they were welcomed by the Sisters with a wonderful meal on their arrival and a better one on their send-off the following day. It was on this occasion that Sr. Rina spoke to her two brothers of the joys of missionary life as she lived it there despite the privations and loneliness of Jowai. Perhaps it was that talk which gave the brothers the courage to tackle the 33 miles back to Shillong the next day after their arrival. It is the statement of her priest-brothers that they never approached Sr. Rina without being encouraged and enlightened by her words and example in sanctity and the apostolate.

As everywhere else, so also in Jowai, firewood was a necessity, but there was no money to buy it. So on holidays or on market days when school closed at noon, Sr. Rina was seen leading the way to the jungles. The enthustiastic girls who accompanied her, competed with her to collect twigs and dry branches of pine. No one could ever outdo her in work, neither in quantity nor in method. In this also she was a true copy of Mother Mazzarello.

One of Sr. Rina's duties in Jowai was to take the girls to the river for their weekly washing and cleaning. She did it with great joy, because to be with the girls was her delight. There at the river she would join the bigger girls to help the small ones to take their bath and especially to wash their heads and comb their hair. She would also join them in their fun. Once while at the riverside, they were caught in a heavy hail storm. Unable to find any shelter whatsoever, Sr. Rina gathered the very small ones under her big apron, while she herself stood unprotected in the rain.

First step in missionary work

When school closed for the winter vacation, Sr. Rina would get ready to commence her eagerly-awaited missionary tours. She would stay away as long as the need and the rules permitted, going from house to house, from village to village, through hills and valleys, walking long distances, accomodating herself to whatever the poor villagers could afford. Her joy knew no bounds in finding that the dream of her youth had at last become a reality. Now she was a 'missionary'! To be a missionary meant to be a witness and a prophet. Yes, she lived what she preached: that Christianity is a religion of love. There she was with a heart overflowing with love, embracing with her large arms and heart every one. The poorer and more ragged the people were, the greater would be her love and attention for them.

She preached like Christ: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." And there she was like anyone of them, eating whatever they offered, sleeping wherever they gave her a place. She prayed much for the souls of those she had to catechize or evangelize. While going from house to house and from village to village, she and her companions would recite rosary after rosary,

intermingling them with the sweet melodies of their lively hymns, thus making their prayers more attactive and elevating. She was also accustomed to reciting frequent ejaculations: these phone calls to the Lord, besides keeping the soul intimately united to God, would also make her apostolate more effective. They would also be a guarantee against many unforeseen experiences. Even today, in Assam after many centuries, one knows what adventures are experienced by missionaries as they cross thick dark jungles, infested with poisonous snakes and wild animals. Sr. Rina's missionary life was well sustained by fervent prayer and a deep spiritual life.

The price of souls

Missionary life is a life of suffering. Sr. Rina understood that fully and lived by it. Yet in this regard she never did anything that would attract attention. In this too she followed the advice of her Father and Founder Don Bosco to the letter: "Suffer heat, cold, hunger, fatigue and contempt, without complaint." She went even further: she accepted suffering most naturally. One of the greatest penances she performed during her tours was to bear up with the severe pain she suffered from corns. They would hurt her tremendously. And yet those who watched her would have thought that walking was a pleasure for her.

There was yet another type of penance she performed. She had an awful fear at crossing bridges. She would feel that with her weight the planks or bamboos under her feet would give way. So, if the river was deep, she would crawl on all fours across the bridge, otherwise even in the coldest winter she would remove her stockings and get into the river and walk across barefooted, no matter how high the water was.

What gave her great joy was that her mission tours produced marvellous results of conversions. In this way she was spreading God's Kingdom among men.

At times she also had quite queer and unexpected experiences. Many a time while passing through some villages of separated brethren, children would follow the Sisters, jeering and shouting: "Shish, Roman ! Roman !" This was an expression they used to show their contempt for the Catholics. Those poor little children did not know what it meant to be a Roman Catholic, but Sr. Rina knowing its true worth would exclaim: "Yes, we are Romans, real Roman Catholics, and we are proud of that." The firm and persuasive way in which she would prononunce these words often attracted children and adults to God and to the Church.

There was deep spirituality supporting Sr. Rina's views and behaviour in her apostolic and missionary activities—the spirituality of St. John Bosco and St. Mary Mazzarello in their thirst for souls. About this we have words of Sr. Rina, as quoted by Sr. Cleofe: "How happy would I be if I could draw all men to Christ! I would be ready to do anything, to suffer any sacrifice provided I could make people know and love God." Addressing her Sisters Sr. Rina would say: "All of us are missionaries: we have to sacrifice ourselves for souls. Courage! All good works cost us suffering . But whatever we do for souls is worthwhile being done."

Sr. Cleofe Fassa would conclude: "Sr. Rina was an enthusiastic and joyful missionary. She has left us and all future generations a shining example of humility, goodness and missionary zeal."

7. In God's Service

Sr. Rina's availability was considered proverbial by everyone who had come to know her. Her superiors could always count on her. Requested to do any service, she would invariably reply: "Yes, I am ready!"....and that too with a smile, even in very difficult moments of her life. But her availability to her Sisters was even more admirable: anytime for anybody. Perhaps this was the quality which her juniors admired most in her. And what of her availability to the young, the children, the poor ? Well, in this she was heroic, as it will be shown in this narration.

Sacred Heart Convent, Mawlai

Sr. Rina stayed for three years in Jowai. In 1951 she was asked to go to Sacred Heart Convent, Mawlai. No doubt

Sr. Rina felt the prick of obedience, of detachment. Jowai was her first field of apostolate in India. She had applied herself whole-heartedly to all kinds of apostolate entrusted to her. Now she had to put a full stop to all that dear work and leave the persons she had come to love, and get acquainted with new situations and people, something that certainly entailed sacrifices and difficulties. But she chose to be 'a daughter of obedience': the virtue that she esteemed so much, as the pointer to the will of God on her behalf.

About Sr. Rina's first years in India Mother Teresa Merlo, her first Provincial, has to say the following: "As soon as Sr. Rina arrived in India she put her mind and heart to learning English and the languages of the places she was sent to, Khasi first and then Hindi, which she thought indispensable. When she was assigned to the house of Jowai her community was very happy to have her, also in view of the help she would give in the oratory, which in fact became, through her, flourishing in no time. Even the protestant girls would flock to it, so much so that their community forbade them to go for fear they would turn Catholic."

"From Jowai," continues Mother Merlo, "Sr. Rina was transferred to the house of Mawlai, where we had a school with a boarding and a very large oratory. In this new assignment Sr. Rina excelled herself. She was gifted with deep spiritual resources, holy audacity and courage that had their roots in great faith. She was able to face with generous self-denial all the difficulties inherent in missionary life, which in those days in Assam was heroic due to excessive work and extreme poverty. I was always edified by Sr. Rina's prompt and cheerful obedience: she had been a source of real joy to me in the years 1948-1951. I have always remembered her even

in later years with affection and gratitude for her truly religious spirit and filial obedience."

Thus one day Sr. Rina arrived at Sacred Heart Convent, Mawlai. She had been there on previous occasions for the annual retreats and also when other errands urged the Sisters to come to Shillong. But now she had come to stay, willingly and happily. For an open, jovial and zealous person like Sr. Rina, it did not take long to make herself at home. Here, too, her duties were very similar to the ones in Jowai: assistance, teaching, oratory and mission tours.

All for them

The Khasi girls, who were more open than their Jaintia sisters, were enchanted with her lively ways and jolly character, and they began to flock to her from all sides. Besides, she did what Don Bosco wanted all his Salesians to do. Don Bosco would say; "It is not enough that you love the young, but you must make them feel that they are loved." Sr. Rina fulfilled this precept perfectly: we may say that this was the most outstanding secret of her success int he field of apostolate.

As in Italy, so here in Mawlai, the oratory flourished and increased by leaps and bounds. Girls of various ages, until their marriage, used to attend the oratory. Sr. Rina would wait at the gate to escort the girls into the oratory and would lead them back to the gate as they returened home. The oratorians would wait eagerly for Sunday and the oratory time. Most of the mothers in Mawlai now, who were then oratorians, recall joyfully the sweet memories of their oratory days. "It was so delightful and elevating to watch Sr. Rina at play in the oratory," says Kong Mary Basiawmoit, "I used to be one of those who enjoyed the scene from afar." "She

used to come with us for walks,"continues Kong Mary, "She was also in charge of assisting us in the study hall, in the refectory. She used to play with us during recreation. She had some mysterious power to draw girls towards her."

Young and energetic, Sr. Rina was available everywhere even for the lowliest works. Not only did she go to the aid of everyone who needed her, but she would also foresee their needs. We gather this from what she said when the was referring to those days. Later on while she was Superior in Mawlai, she had requested a young Sister to do what she used to do then: "Sister, fifteen years ago when I was here as a young Sister, I used to take the soiled linen from the box to the laundry and soak them in the water. Now please do that job yourself and don't let the elder sisters do it." She would not only take the linens and soak them but she was always first in the laundry to wash clothes and carry them to the river with the girls to rinse them. There was no place of work where Sr. Rina would be absent. Her lively presence and example would invite the girls to be active and generous and the work would be done faster than it was expected.

It is true that youth lack experience, yet very often they know how to pass a correct judgement on their teachers and assistants. "Noticing so much sanctity, maturity and motherliness in her, we used to tell her", says Sr. Felicita, "Sr. Rina, you will soon be a superior." But she would carefully ward off such remarks saying: "Yes, I will be superior of the convent ducks."

Superior of St. Joseph's Convent, Tezpur.

Sr. Rina's stay in Mawlai was very short. By now her Superiors had found her fit to shoulder the responsibility of a

superior: to run a community of Sisters, a school, a boarding and all what that post entails. Here we add the authoritative witness of Mother Cesira Gallina who writes: "I came to know Sr. Rina Colussi for the first time in June 1952, when as Provincial I had gone from Madras to visit our institutions in Assam. She was then assistant and teacher in our house at Mawlai. After the Retreat I chose her to come with me to Kohima, Nagaland, to explore possibilities for a foundation there. It was the first time that two Sisters had gone to Nagaland, which at the time was in a political mess. Rev. Fr. Marocchino sdb, was there waiting for us. We went together to the civil authorities for permission to open an English medium school. We had no chance then....But I found Sr. Rina capable of guiding a religious community, so in the course of that year I appointed her superior of our house of Tezpur..Sr. Rina had real evangelical charity! For everybody she had always an encouraging word, a thought of faith."

After four years of her arrival in the missions, in 1952 Sr. Rina was chosen to be Superior of St. Joseph's Convent, Tezpur, which had been started in 1936. In the midst of their utter poverty, the sisters had put up a very modest building that would shelter them from the inclemency of the weather. As the years went by, Sr. Rina put up four nice, neat class rooms opening on a verandah, to accommodate K.G. day-scholars, and improved the playground. In Sr. Rina the Superiors found a Sister of exceptional qualities who could be entrusted with this important task. But in going there her first thought was not just to put up a building, but to continue to promote the Founder's spirit among the Sisters and the children through her love and concern for every one of them.

It goes without saying that Sr. Rina's readiness to comply

with the will of her Superiors in no way lessened the pain of the sacrifice she was called to make. Going to the Brahmaputra valley meant facing altogether different climate, environment and situations. It required of her the need of getting acquainted with a type of people completely different from those she had mingled with in these past years. Now she had to learn a new language (Hindi) and become familiar



with their customs and manners. Moreover all this time she had enjoyed the pleasant cool climate of the Khasi Hills. Instead now she would have to bear the humid heat of the Brahmaputra valley. Besides, now she was going to Tezpur not as an ordinary Sister, who would have the timely assistance and advice of an understanding superior, but as the Superior who would be asked by others for timely help and care. The latter consideration brought fear to her heart and "she cried bitterly", says Sr. Felicita Syngngoh.

Always ahead

But was not her watchword "Have no fear! Let us go ahead. The Lord is with us" ? These reflections dispelled the dark clouds of human fears. No sooner had she arrived in Tezpur than she began making friends. The simple, submissive, good-natured children of the tea garden labourers received her with love and veneration. The traditional family spirit of the community offered her the most cordial welcome. How could it be otherwise ? They found her so loving, so kind. Wherever she went, she went with a broad, unaffected motherly smile. In no time she would feel at home with anybody and make everybody feel at home with her.

Without any delay, she began to apply herself to the study of Hindi and Assamese. She mastered languages with remarkable speed and ease, which was actually an outcome of her untiring zeal. She would repeat to others what she herself knew: "Mastery of the language of the people is an indispensable condition for ensuring success in the field of apostolate." Now as a Superior, she had to interest herself in every type of activity. Her sense of belonging made her take an interest in everything. Her unlimited trust in God and in our heavenly Mother, to whom she would have recourse in all circumstances, helped all the activities of the house to thrive.

New ways of doing good

As in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, so also at Tezpur, and in most places, the houses of the Sisters were and still are, in one form or other, real mission stations, and therefore one of the main works of the Sisters is to tour the villages. In Tezpur there was also another very important apostolate—

the pre-marriage courses at which the Sisters would help the young girls for the worthy reception of the Sacrament of Matrimony and for the understanding of the greatness and duties of christian family life. Whenever Sr. Rina could offer herself in any of these activities, she did it most generously and unsparingly. She also saw to it that the Sisters engaged in these activities, lacked nothing that would ensure good results. While providing with the necessary equipments and other facilities, she would also inject into them a good dose of her zeal and enthusiasm. She did that more through her example than through counsels, so that the Sisters felt attracted to imitate her in her ways and virtues.

She took also great pains in the Christian formation of the girls, especially the boarders. This accounts for the many vocations that St. Joseph's Convent, Tezpur produced for the F.M.A.s. and for other congregations, especially for the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians.

Sr. Rachel Isorary, who was a boarder in Tezpur, writes on this topic: "I was not with Sr. Rina for many years, yet I can still remember and testify that whatever she said to others by way of advice or recommendation, she herself practised first. She lived the maxim of St. Paul: 'Rejoice in God always, again I say rejoice.' She was jolly by nature and she liked to see her girls too always happy. Her preference was for the poor and the ignorant."

The same Sister narrates a little episode: "I was a rather naughty girl. Once I omitted doing my assigned chore. A teacher wanted to beat me. I boldly remonstrated saying: "We hear that Don Bosco never used to beat his children. Why do you want to beat me ?" The teacher, quite embar-

rassed, went and reported everything to Sr. Superior. Without delay I was sent for and Sr. Rina questioned me about the incident. I said everything as it had happened. I also added, "The sisters never beat us, why then does this teacher do so ?" Sr. Superior answered: "You are really a naughty girl," and then turning to some girls who were standing by she remarked: "Who knows, one day she might become a nun!" All those who heard Sr. Superior's remark laughed. I didn't pay much heed to what Sr. Superior had said nor did I give a second thought to it. But today by the grace of God I am a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. The prophetic words of Sr. Rina still echo in my ears...."

A providential encounter

A short historical note will introduce the meeting of Mother Catherine Mania with Sr. Rina The first batch of six F.M.A's to come to India arrived in Tanjore (South India) in 1922 on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, headed by one of the kindest souls that ever lived: Sr. Theresa Balestra. They settled uncomplainingly in the bare little house given them by Fr. Eugene Mederlet S.D.B. then rector of the nearby Salesian House, but soon to be the first Salesian Archbishop of Madras.

The follwing year Sr. Innocenza Vallino F.M.A, a born missionary and five more Sisters arrived at Gauhati in early December 1923.

In February 1929 the first Provincial of the Salesian Sisters, Mother Tullia Deberardinis, arrived in Madras, which was to be the Provincial's residence. By then South India had four F.M.A. houses, and North India, which was to be one province with South India, had two. From the very outset

when there was hardly enough money for a third class railway ticket for such a long journey, it was a real problem to spare a Sister from the school for three or four weeks to accompany Mother Provincial: the enormous distance, and the incredible differences of races, languages and customs posed a considerable difficulty for the Sisters. The difficulty grew with the years. Development had to depend mainly on missionary personnel and Divine Providence. The Provincial could not visit the North more than once a year, and decisions had to be taken by the Provincial Council in Madras.

During the Second World War the Sisters could not move more than five miles from the residence; correspodence was censured; and Assam lived in fear of a Japanese invasion. Even though our heroic Mother Avio managed somehow to visit annually the North-East portion of her Province, which now numbered six convents, a separate Province became a must. This was confirmed by the V. Rev. Mother Carolina Novasconi of the General Council on her visit in 1949. It was not, however, before the close of the 1953 General Chapter that the project was realized. 24th November 1953 marks the birth of the Northern Province of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The headquarters were to be at Shillong—Sacred Heart Convent, Mawlai. Mother Catherine Mania was appointed as the Provincial of this newly formed Province. What joy for all the Sisters to have their Provincial so close to them.

The new Provincial

Sr. Rina rejoiced more than others because she always loved to keep in touch with her superiors, from whom she wanted support and guidance. In Mother Mania God had given to the new Province a real mother and true guide. Sr. Rina benefited

from the presence of Mother Mania as few other Sisters have. They met for the first time during the Provincial visitation of the House of Tezpur. Mother Mania herself narrates the impressions of that first meeting: "I met Sr. Rina for the first time at St. Joseph's Convent, Tezpur. At that very first meeting she gave me the impression of a person who is only desirous to do good: a person full of God, of the Institute, of the Superiors ; a soul open, serene, cordial; one of those souls, who leave a luminous wake wherever they pass. I was able to ascertain soon, in actual life, the first impression I had formed of her."

The meeting of Mother Mania and Sr. Rina, and the subsequent relationship that grew up between them proved a real blessing for the Northern Province of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as well as a source of spiritual growth in their own life of perfection. Mother Mania found in Sr. Rina a person of exceptional ability, of initiative and of solid virtue. She mined out all the wealth that was stored within her. While Sr. Rina found in Mother Mania a soul of of admirable understanding and sure support: a saintly superior to whom she could and would adhere, unconditionally and unhesitatingly.

The community of Tezpur had a smooth sailing for a short span—less than two years. In the company and presence of such a motherly superior everything seemed to go well. Everybody felt happy. Everywhere there was enthusiasm, rejoicing and remarkable progress. One day unexpectedly a letter arrived from Mother Provincial, requesting Sr. Rina to leave St. Joseph's Convent, to take up the charge of the Convent of Bandel. It was a terrible blow, both for her and for the whole house. She had grown so familiar with

everyone and everything ! She had gained experience in the art of governing and constructing. As for her she could accept such decisions because she had taken the vow of obedience. Not so with the girls who were not easily consoled. Weeping was heard everywhere. On the actual day of the departure it reached such a climax that Sr. Anne Ward, cane in hand, drove all into the chapel and locking them inside told them: "If you really love Sr. Superior, rather than weeping, pray for her."

Years later Sr. Bernadette Surin, Sr. Elizabeth Condpan and Sr. Elizabeth Minj, who were among those imprisoned in the chapel, would relate this incident to Sr. Rina in the presence also of Sr. Anne Ward. There would be great laughter then, but it was not so when the incident actually took place.

In love with our Lady of Bandel

Sr. Rina's transfer to Bandel certainly entailed a great deal of sacrifices. However it also had its attractions. Sr. Rina had heard much about Our Lady of Bandel and in her filial love for Our Lady, she had even wished to pay a visit to her shrine. She could also hope for a warm welcome from the Sisters, who had already been vaguely acquainted with her during their annual retreats. Within these few years Sr. Rina's name as a true Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, a faithful copy of Mother Mazzarello, had spread in the Province. So the Sisters eagerly awaited her arrival. As she had hoped, she did receive a very cordial, hearty welcome from the community of Bandel, where every Sister was senior to her in age and profession.

When Mother Mania took up the charge of the new born Province of Assam, this consisted of 45 Sisters, 7 houses, a

sum of Rs. 140/- and....an immense work ahead. There was, besides, a debt of Rs. 35,000/-which had been contracted just for the institutions at Bandel. The house and property in Bandel was bought in 1950 with money borrowed from the Holy Rosary Association of Bandel Church. In view of the good the Sisters were expected to do the locality, the Association granted the loan at 3% interest. The loan could be repaid only in 1957, when the construction of the Novitiate and Khasi School in Nongthymmai was in full course. Divine Providence was marvellous at all times!

When one looks forward to a new foundation, the most pressing thought is to have good personnel. But from where? In the case of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the only possibility was to get and train local vocations. It was not easy to find them. They had to be searched out and selected, and once got, they had to be housed and provided for every need, both spiritual and material. Who would do that ? The sisters were already overworked. In such a predicament Mother Provincial thought of Sr. Rina. With her indomitable courage and zeal, unwavering faith and exceptional abilities she would be the ideal person to assist her in her plans. The place for the new providential venture would be Bandel. No better spot could have been chosen for this purpose. The plot of land which had been bought had a ground floor structure with some small rooms. However it was too small for housing aspirants as well as school children. So the idea of a new spacious building was born.

Mother Mania tells the story of the construction of the first two-storeyed building in which Sr. Rina played the the main part and which highlights to a great extent her wit, wisdom and virtue. "For the building of Bandel I turned to Very Rev. Fr. A. Alessi, Salesian Provincial of Calcutta, who

so kindly promised to lend us Rs. 20,000/- eventually he lent us much more. With great difficulty we put together Rs. 10,000/-. Certainly it was not enough, but all the same it was good enough to make a start with. To undertake this work, I called Sr. Rina down to Bandel from Tezpur because I found that the actual Superior, Sr. Clotilde Appiano, was too worn out to be burdened with a construction. We prayed much and had made it a practice of going up the stairs to the shrine of Our Lady of Bandel on our knees saying the Rosary. Our Lady really granted our prayers. One of these prayers was that we might get Brother Charles Castelli S.D.B., a wonderful builder, to undertake the work.

"At that time Bro. Castelli was exclusively at the disposal of the Bishop of Krishnagar, but His Lordship was then in America. We decided to ask Rev. Fr. Provincial to allow the Brother to take charge of our construction. Accordingly Sr. Rina and I went to Calcutta to meet Fr. Provincial, who said he would ask the Brother to come. He did not make it a mystery that it would not be so easy. In fact he added: "It would be better if you, too, could go to Krishnagar and approach him." I had to come away to Shillong, so I entrusted the task to Sr. Rina. She went with Sr. Eugene Cazzuli. When they told the brother what they wanted, he started saying, "No, no no and no." Then Sr. Rina (the Madonna was at her side) said to him: "But Brother, don't you know that the whole Province is praying that you might say 'Yes'?" He seemed moved and asked: "Am I so bad?" Sr. Rina had hit the nail on the head. He accepted the proposal on two conditions: first, never to let the material fail; second, every Saturday to give him money to pay the workers. The miracle had been accomplished: yet there remained the difficulty of keeping the promise.

"It was difficult to find and bring the material to Bandel."



This meant that Sr. Rina would have to go to Calcutta several

times a week. To get the necessary money another miracle was necessary, to which Sr. Rina contributed a great deal. I have to note the great spirit of faith, availability and mortification of Sr. Rina. She was suffering journeying of any conveyance and I came to know about it too late, when at the end of the work one day she wrote to me: "Mother, I have been as usual to Calcutta: the Good Lord surely has given me much strength. I have left Bandel after taking only a cup of coffee, because I cannot have anything else when I travel. I did not have even a sip of water the whole day. But on coming back at 9.00 p.m. I could have a meal, that gave me life again." This happened for two years. And Sr. Rina always had a good 'appetite'! She was so good at disguising her trouble that even when travelling with her I never noticed it. During her work at Bandel and later on at Nongthymmai I had to admire the faith, courage and enterprising spirit of Sr. Rina. Oh, how great was her trust in Our Lady! How many times she went up the long stairs of Bandel to the shrine of Our Lady on her knees to ask for the necessary material. How much prayer, how much faith! She would receive all what she wanted either because of her faith or of her good Salesian ways.

"Coming back to Bandel, Brother came with his men and proved to be truly wonderful. He went to a very early Mass, at about 4 o'clock, then came with his workers who worked really hard. The work went ahead so fast and so very well that we could only kneel down and say: "Thank You, Mother Mary!" The building was blessed on 20th January 1955. The great speed with which the work progressed speaks of the innumerable sacrifices which Sr. Rina had to make and the enormous pressure to which she had been subjected. Yet everything was done in utter simplicity and astonishing serenity. Never a complaint escaped her lips ! Never! Rather

there was the joy of doing good that pressed her on till the end."

"Auxilium", Bandel

With the completion of the building not everything was settled in Bandel. The 'Auxilium' Bandel was to be also an English Medium School for the children of the locality: how many were willing to be admitted! It was to be a pre-aspirants' house for the Sisters, an oratory for as many children as would come to it, a dispensary for the poor of the place. These complex activities needed place and security. Sr. Rina was asked to acquire more space and to secure protection for the Sisters, the aspirants and the children. Much more than for the building and general administration of the house, it was for these additional activities that she had to suffer most. In these difficulties her virtue, tact and faith in God and in the goodwill of men shone to heroicity. Sr. Rina had such a human and kind approach to persons, that it would be difficult to find people who would not be won over to her or to her suggestions and advices. In one way or other her good manners and charity would influence people of any kind. Many episodes could be quoted to show this facet of her deep spirituality. We quote one as an example.

When she was in Bandel she had to worry much to close a path that was running across the Sisters' premises, placing them in a dilemma: either to give away part of their precious compound or allow people to pass freely through their land. Sr. Rina had the path closed also through the influence of good Hindu gentlemen, whom she had won to her cause by her kindness and charity. When Mr. C.E. Banerjee who was involved in the matter, was asked to write the story for us, he said: "I shall do anything for my dear Sr. Rina. But I am

afraid I will not be doing a fine job, because everytime I think of her, tears flow from my eyes. You see, I don't love Sr. Rina for what she did to me, but for what she was to me. This cannot be put down in writing: it is far beyond words."

Cooperation

Here is what Mr. C.E. Banerjee wrote about those troublesome days: "It was an afternoon of June 1955 when I first met Sr. Rina: I had gone to her on an errand to collect the subscription for the local night guards. The motherly affectionate smiling face of that smart active Sister attracted me: I bowed my head before her. I felt confident to ask about her institution and her plans. She told me of her desire to come to the help of the local people with a big school, a dispensary and the assistance of the poor. She spoke also of the fact that a plot of her land was of no use because of a path sepating it from the rest of the compound. I suggested to her to go to the chairman and promised her that I, too, would help. She did go to the chairman, but the municipal board of Hooghly-Chinsurah was not in favour of disposing of the path. On the other hand some of the local people were provoking the mob against the Sisters saying that they had come there to spread Christianity.

"Our opponents even organised meetings on the playground next to the Sisters' dwelling and would shout slogans against them, their institution, the chairman of the board and me, because we were their supporters. They even filed a suit in court against us. Sometimes Sr. Rina would feel helpless and would call me to inquire about how things were faring, what were the feelings of the people. As difficulties increased, she used to spend more time in prayer: I saw that myself so many times. At last Mr. Chairman thought of a

solution. Just by the side of the Sisters' compound there was actually another path then covered by jungle. If the Sisters were ready to clear the jungle and turn that path into a metalled road at their own cost, then permission would be granted to close the path that ran across their compound. On receiving the letter from the Chairman, to this purpose, Sister called me: she was so happy and overwhelmed with joy that tears showed up in her eyes and she kept on repeating the Lord's name in thanksgiving. I, too, could not restrain from weeping. It was victory: victory of God's will.

"Without delay she began working on the new road. I cannot describe how the girls and Sr. Rina too worked at it. They used to carry bricks on their heads from morning till mid-day and then again in the evenings. Some of the opponents were laughing and making fun of them, whose only aim was to offer their lives for the betterment of the people. But the Lord was on their side and only that mattered to them. Finally the road was completed and handed over to the municipality, who gave them permission to wall up the path of discord...After this Sr. Rina was called to Shillong. Before she left Bandel, she called me and said: "The plant which has been taken so much care of will grow into a mighty tree and will give its sweet fruits, even to those who had tried to destroy it: their children too will benefit by it. But...others will see it!"

Sr. Rina's activity in Bandel offers a shining example of the Salesian way of living and acting according to Don Bosco's principles. After relying on God and His Blessed Mother, she asked the cooperation of all people of goodwill to realize her plans—the plans of God.

8. In search of vocations

Once the anxiety of the constrution work was over, there arose the greater problem of finding new candidates for sisterhood. Here too, the advice and experience of the Salesian Fathers stood the Sisters in good stead. They had been recruiting candidates from Kerala for the past few years. "Why not follow them?" thought the Sisters. Sr. Rina had fully come up to the expectation of Mother Provincial in the construction work. Now, once again the Superior would place her hopes in Sr. Rina to carry out this delicate task. They turned towards Kerala in South India, where vocations were plentiful.

The promising South

The first recruiting compaign would surely offer several difficulties. She was young , alone, in an unknown place,

unfamiliar with language and with only one or two close friends. But with the blessing of God and of her Surperiors, she hoped and went ahead. Of course, she did have some directions as where to go and what to do, from certain priests whom she knew. With her experience, exceptional adaptability and above all by her conquering optimism, she overcame every difficulty and managed to get a good number of vocations. She had selected two groups of girls: one group as pre-aspirants to stay in Bandel, and a senior group to be sent to Shillong, to commence their postulancy.

Here is an interesting narration presented by Sr. Bridgit Kurian, who was among the first pre-aspirants. "It was May 1955.... I was anxiously waiting to meet the first Salesian Sister. I was determined to become a missionary to work in Assam. I had no idea who the FMAs were. One of the most wonderful experiences in my life has been my first meeting with Sr. Rina Colussi. My parish priest, Fr. Joseph Pareil, had served as a military chaplain in Northern India, where he came into contact with the Salesian Fathers and Sisters. He had received a letter from Sr. Rina informing him about her visit to our parish. During Catechism class our Parish Priest had already briefed us about the noble call to missionary life and about the fact that a missionary Sister would be visiting us shortly.

I was only an M. E. school student then, but had already made up my mind and even spoken to the Parish Priest about my decision. Having also spoken to my mother, she agreed to accompany me and we went to see Sr. Rina. How well I remember that day! As soon as she saw me she asked me: "What is your name?" The only thing I knew to say in English was: "My name is Bridgit." I was fully taken up by her maternal attitude, specially by her charming smile

which I shall never forget..... She asked me several questions which I could hardly understand and to which I always answered 'Yes'. She then met other girls who wished to go with her to Assam. She gave us all pictures of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. It was the first time I saw a picture of Mary Help of Christians and I was so taken up with it that when I reached home I gave away all other pictures, but jealously kept this particular one and would look at it again and again.

"In the meantime everything was arranged for our departure. Four girls would go from our parish. On the appointed day we joined Sr. Rina at Alwaye Railway Station from where we proceeded to Madras by train. She kept us happy and cheerful all the way although our young hearts were aching to leave our dear ones and go so far away. We reached Madras where we had to stay for about a week. Sr. Rina had to go to some other convents on other business, which included a visit to Sr. Virginia Marchetti, a companion of hers in the early days, at that time she was Novice Mistress at Kotagiri in the South Indian Province. We were left at St. Xavier's Convent, Broadway.

Here I suffered terribly from home-sickness..... Food and climate were so different that I got sick. I wanted to go back home at once. In fact, one evening when all the others were in Church, I with another friend, tried to run away. Luckily, the gate-keeper did not let us out. Sr. Rina returned after some time and the mere sight of her removed from me all my home-sickness. She took us on a picnic to the beach, which I enjoyed very much. After a few days we left for Bengal. We had plenty of adventures all along. I clearly remember a particular fact. We did not have sufficient sleeping accommodation and Sr. Rina would cushion our

heads on her lap. There were about thirty-two of us and you can imagine.....all wanted to have the privilege of sleeping on her lap.

Howrah Bridge !

"We arrived safely at Howrah station, where Sr. Alice Correa came to meet us. We got into the train for Bandel and arrived at our destination safe and sound. We were the first group of pre-aspirants in Bandel. The Sisters tried their best to make us feel at home and cheerful.....But the true animator was certainly Sr. Rina, our first Superior. She was everything to us. Her smile, her words and her example worked magic in our formation. Sr. Rina had a heart of gold..... a heart overflowing with love.. This was what impressed me most about her. This, according to me, was her greatest characteristic. She loved us immensely and desired our welfare in everything . She worked with us, played with us, prayed with us..Family spirit was not preached but lived cent per cent. Although she was the Superior, she would work along with us carrying stones, bricks and mud. Every now and then we would be dismayed and terrified at the sight of a snake, but with Sr. Rina at our side to help us, we would even gallantly run after it to kill it.

"In my letters I used to tell my mother that my Sr. Superior was like her, kind and good. This would make her happy. I left Bandel after a year and a half, but I had the good fortune of having Sr. Rina as my Superior in the Novitiate and in the Juniorate. She was both kind and firm at the same time. I remember even now certain corrections she gave me then, and which still help me in my Salesian life. I shall ever treasure them. It was Sr. Rina who introduced my companions and me to practical salesian life in the school, in the oratory and in the playground."

"She was so motherly !"

Sr. Mary Thottungal, one of the senior girls of that batch adds: "My very first impression about Sr. Rina was that she had a very approachable and inviting personality, with a very pleasant smile on her face. She was understanding, kind and maternal. Though I could understand her English, I could not speak it. I would say a generous 'Yes' to all the questions she put me to find out whether I had a vocation. My father who was at my side had been so impressed by her



motherliness and kind manners, that he readily gave me permission to leave for the missions of Assam, though none at home was ready to comply with my wish previously, because

in those days Assam was considered a dangerous place with its forests and wild animals."

The parents felt secure to send their children with Sr. Rina, who had by now become one of their most esteemed friends. Many of them would keep up correspondence with her, others would enquire from their children about her: in a word, those who had seen her even once, would never forger her."

A novitiate

After the thrust for vocations, the Provincial had to think of the possibility of having her own novitiate in the province. It is interesting to listen to what Mother Mania writes about it:

"Almost from my first arrival I realized that the Province should have its own Novitiate. Divine Providence must have said "Amen", because we soon admitted the first two Aspirants, a Garo and a Khasi: both of them could be Postulants any day, having spent several years in our Convents.

"I requested the Secretary General, Rev. Mother Clelia Genghini, to obtain for us the required permission for the canonical erection of the new Novitiate.

"This Mother remarked in a letter to us: "With just two Aspirants you ask for a 'Canonically erected Novitiate'?" Being very free and friendly with her, I wrote back at once: "Mother, two novices only to start with. Next year we shall have four, and the next eight and the next sixteen." A quick reply stated: "God bless your wonderful hopes, I ha.e put up your request. In any case remember that Rome is eternal." I then approached Fr. Mario Bianchi with Mother's reply and asked whether he could manage somehow to obtain a quick

approval from Rome. He knew the situation and really moved heaven and earth I think. In less than three weeks His Excellency Msgr. Ferrando, gave me the coveted news that permission was granted. The first novice professed on 5th August 1954, and two others received the habit on January 6, 1955.

The following year the new novices were four in number, in 1957 eight and in 1958 sixteen. When I left Assam in May 1960, to return to South India, their number of the two years 1958 and 1959 combined, was thirty-two. I happened to remark that there must be humour in heaven and told the story of the redoubling of the number every year. Really God and our Blessed Mother Mary were providing for vocations. But surely somebody had to go to select them."

A second trip South

Sr. Rina was asked to take a second 'vocation trip' to Kerala. This time the adventures were of a different nature, because Sr. Rina had become somewhat familiar with at least certain parts of the state. She also had her old friends to give her better direction. Even so, she had some experiences that were tough to handle. One of these is very vividly described by Sr. Elizabeth Edattukaran.

"It was a rather rainy monsoon, in the month of June 1956. In the church of my village I saw a tall, fair Sister dressed in white, kneeling with hands joined and devotedly participating in the Holy Mass. It was the first time I had seen a European sister, Sr. Rina. I was rather distracted during Mass that morning. God's plans in my regard and in that of my companions, Mary Mampilly and Rosy Devasy, were taking shape on that providential morning."

"Sr. Rina had written to Rev. Fr. Joseph Kundukulam, at present Bishop of Trichur, then Parish Priest of Irinjalakuda, about her coming to recruit candidates for the Salesian missions of Assam. Some months had passed since the receipt of the letter and in the meantime Fr. Kundukulam had been transferred from Irinjalakuda to Mala, my parish, 16 miles from his former parish. Sr. Rina arrived in Irinjalakuda and was greatly disappointed to learn that Fr. Kundukulam had gone to Mala. Sr. Rina could speak Italian, English, Khasi and Hindi, but knew no Malayalam. Bravely she proceeded towards Mala and reached exactly in front of the Parish Church.

"The big white Sister, with a medium-sized suitcase in hand, walked steadily towards the Church. The bystanders stared at her, because in Kerala no nun would carry a big box like that. And her dress was so queer! After taking a few steps Sr. Rina was lucky enough to meet the sacristan and to enquire about the Parish Priest. The poor man by signs explained that the priest was not at home, but had gone to administer the last sacraments. Sr. Rina, hungry, thirsty and tired as she was, did not stop there. With the suitcase in hand she walked along the road to meet the priest as directed by the sacristan. She was fortunate to meet Father coming along the same road. It was 7.00 p.m. on Friday. The priest was much surprised to see Sr. Rina in that place, at that hour. After an exchange of greetings, the priest assured her that all the hardships she had undergone would not be in vain. Sr. Rina heaved a sigh of relief at such encouraging and consoling news and uttered her familiar expression, "Deo Gratias."

"As it was getting late, the priest led her to the Carmelite Convent. The night's rest was far from refreshing, in a bed

much too short for her. Consequently she rose very early and in a few minutes she was once again on the road leading to the Church. At that moment I too was going with my little sister Lucy, who is now a Carmelite nun to assist at Mass. All the way I was asking the loving Heart of Jesus to show me the way to follow his call. With these feelings I entered the Church and there my eyes caught sight of Sr. Rina. After the Gospel, Father did an unusual thing, he addressed the people and told them the reason for the presence of that 'strange' Sister, saying that she had come all the way from Assam to select cnadidates who wished to go there to become missionaries, and that those who had any such desire, could meet her after Mass. I felt an inexplicable relief, so also my companions who nurtured similar sentiments regarding the future. I thought I would be the only one to meet Sr. Rina, but after Mass five of us approached her. In what language did we speak ? I could not say a word in English. By her magic look and magnetic smile Sr. Rina conveyed to me all the message that she wanted to convey regarding my going with her. The good parish priest told me to go home and tell my parents to meet him in order that I may get ready to leave within the short time of only six days. Sr. Rina's hardships were indeed not in vain."

Another story

Let us listen to the impressions about Sr. Rina as told by Sr. Marykutty of the Sacred Heart, who met Sr. Rina during this vocation campaign. "From the age of eight, after hearing a talk given by a priest on missionary vocations, in front of the enthroned picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, I had made up my mind to be a missionary. During the summer vacation of 1956, after completing my S.S.L.C. Examination, having got the address from the mission magazine "Preshitha

Keralam", I wrote a letter to Sr. Superior of Bandel, expressing my desire to join a missionary congregation. A few days later my mother handed me a letter. Full of confidence and excitement I ran in front of the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and prayerfully opened the letter.....I was not mistaken.

It was a reply to my letter from Sr. Rina. A long, loving, encouraging letter written in fine handwriting, announcing that she would be at the Clarist Convent at Palai on 16th June. My parents who had no objection to my joining a convent or even going to the missions, opposed the idea of my going to Shillong, a very cold place unsuited to my health. But my brother agreed to help me out of the difficult situation: he would go and meet the Sister and bring news. He did meet Sr. Rina. My brother, knowing English and being also a very sociable person by nature, had no difficulty in entering into a nice chat with the charming saintly, Salesian Sister. During the conversation she expressed the desire to meet me personally at the Adoration Convent of Vazhappally. My brother left her, very much encouraged and edified by her behaviour.

"It was the 22nd of June 1956, in the parlour of the Adoration Convent at Vazhappally that I met Sr. Rina for the first time. I was soon captivated by her motherly ways. I could speak English, hence there was no difficulty for us to get acquainted with each other and exchange views and plans. Thus on that unforgettable day we laid the foundation of a holy and intimate friendship which would grow with the years. I left the presence of Sr. Rina with a heart overflowing with hope and a face radient with joy. Before leaving she gave me a blessing by making a sign of the cross on my forehead and told me to meet her and my companions at Alwaye



Sr. Rina with oratory children at Jowai



Sr. Rina in the Oratory at Mawlai



Sr. Rina's first attempts at construction

←—

Sr. Rina with first aspirant at Bandel



Railway Station on the 30th of June. We were poor and it cost my brother many a sacrifice to get me ready for the departure, but he did everything willingly and generously because he wanted, at all costs, to send me with Sr. Rina in whom he had seen the amiable Christ and the gentle Mother Mary.

"Everyone arrived at the appointed time and place and as the train came into the station all those present marvelled at the ease and naturalness with which Sr. Rina pushed our trunks, one after another, into our reserved compartment. All the onlookers, most of them our relations, tried to stop her saying it was unsuited to her health, that it was unbecoming for a nun to do that in the presence of so many men and coolies. Sr. Rina paid no heed to all that. Kind and considerate as she was, she did not want the parents of the girls to waste their money on coolies. She was strong enough to unload those boxes and she would do it. All without exception were edified by the agility and generosity of this unique Sister.

"Suddenly the signal went," adds Sr. Elizabeth, "and Sr. Rina collected her 24 recruits. She knew them all by name. She saw all our parents and dear ones. She had a word of encouragement for each of them."

What people remember

"Even today my brother," writes one Sister, "speaks of Sr. Rina with much veneration and affection. This is not the attitude of my brother alone: all those who sent their children with Sr. Rina felt the same."

Sr. Elizabeth's dear ones later on wrote to her: "After

your departure we went home broken-hearted, but the thought of that loving, saintly Sister to whom we had entrusted our daughter consoled us. Sr. Rina will be the guardian of our daughter, we said to ourselves."

One Sister of that batch of girls writes: "I came to know the Salesian Sisters through Sr. Rina. My parents allowed me to leave for Assam only because they saw in the person of Sr. Rina the personification of goodness, charity and above all, a profound humility and a great maternal attitude." Another said: "My mother did not know English, yet she gave me permission to go to Assam to become an F.M.A. because the good Sr. Rina had spoken to her through the language of her heart."

Regarding Sr. Rina's vocation campaigns and their after effects, Mother Mania writes: "She worked very hard for vocations. When I told her that now having the pre-aspirantate, we needed to search for vocations, suggesting that we could try in Malabar, she replied: 'Immediately, Mother, I am ready. I don't know the place or the language, but if in Madras they give me a Sister as a companion, I may prove useful." She did bring a good group of aspirants, who now sing praises to the Lord, for their joy of being Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and also for having known Sr. Rina. She loved the junior Sisters very much, with the heart of a mother. She wished them to be generous, strong and sincere."

Vocations everywhere

Although the two vocation campaings in Kerala were among the most spectacular vocation drives of Sr. Rina, it would be wrong to conclude that she exhausted her efforts for vocations there and elsewhere. In fact, it would be more

correct to say that her whole life was a continual effort to foster vocations among the young to any Congregation, but especially to the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It could not be otherwise. In fact several Sisters attribute the beginning of their vocation to Sr. Rina.

Sr. Felicita says that although from a very tender age she felt the desire to be a Sister, she never had the courage to reveal it to anyone. She feared a blank refusal from her people,



because she was the youngest girl in the family. Besides she was extremely timid and shy. Yet in spite of all that, she felt sufficiently confident to reveal her innermost secrets to Sr. Rina. So inviting were her ways that nobody felt embarrassed in her pressence. Sr. Rina, who was an expert in detec-

ting vocations, would take all pains to follow them up. To her care and attention she added much prayer and sacrifices, the efficacy of which she never doubted. Many of the teachers, who would come from Bombay or Goa or other parts of India to teach in any of our English medium schools would, sooner or latter, ask to join the Institute, attracted by the good ways and example also of Sr. Rina.

Sr. Mary Sarkar speaks of the time she was pre-aspirant at Bandel: "There was joy in the house when we would come to know that Sr. Rina was coming to Bandel. Sisters and aspirants would run to meet her. As I was the first and only Bengali girl there, she would smile at me so kindly and enquire about my place. She was so good to call me as companion on her errands to Calcutta: she was then building the Novitiate house at Nongthymmai. I was so delighted to go with her, because she would be very kind to me: on the way she would teach me English. Since we would go to visit some of her benefactors, she would teach me how to behave with them; and if we were invited to take a meal in their houses, she would tell me how to use the napkin as other people did. I was struck by these benefactors, especially one Mr. Gabriel and his family who would welcome her: they simply venerated her. They thought her coming was a blessing for their home. Yet most often she would avoid going to their houses, because she said she had too much to do. On such days we would sit somewhere and eat together what we had brought from Bandel. As I was shy to eat, she would encourage me to take of her share in front of her. All along I would be thinking: I want to be a Sister like her."

"Once I went to see Sr. Rina with my mother, who was her past-pupil, and with my sisters," tells us Sr. Rosina Susngi. "Fr. Dino happened to be there that day. I, being

the smallest and the youngest, was the centre of attraction, even with my torn ueil on my head. We had a long lively chat with Sr. Rina and Fr. Dino. Before we parted Sr. Rina asked me: "When are you going to Bandel aspirantate ?" I was surprised at the question. I was only in class one then and never thought anything about what would I do in future. But the question of Sr. Rina remained deep in my mind even when we had gone home. Two days later I received a small parcel from Sr. Rina with some useful clothes and two small beautiful veils. None of us had noticed my torn veil, but Sr. Rina did and provided me with the veils, perhaps to relieve me from future embarassment.

"Weeks and months and years passed, but all along the words of Sr. Rina kept on ringing in my ears, 'When are you going to Bandel ?" After three years at the tender age of ten I left for the aspirantate of Bandel. On the day of my departure Sr. Rina sent the van all the way from Nongthymmai to Mawlai to take me to the motor office.

"As I was always up to mischief and not possessing the qualities required by my vocation I felt that my perseverance might become a problem. My alarmed mother confided her sorrow to Sr. Rina, who assured her: "Don't worry: she will make her profession and her perpetual profession too." Today by the grace of God I am a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, always grateful to Sr. Rina.

Sr. Rina was concerned with vocations up to the last moment of her life. Why ? Even after death. To this effect Sr. Regina Lyndoh FMA has an interesting story to tell us. She narrates: "I first met Sr. Rina in March 1966, when I went to Sacred Heart Convent, Mawlai in order to be admitted in the school. After speaking to my father Sr. Rina looked at

me from head to foot with a searching and penetrating look. I felt embarrassed and did not know what to do and was thinking, 'Why has this Sister to look at me that way ?' As if understanding my situation, Sr. Rina asked me three times: "Are you good ?" I replied with a smile not knowing exactly what to say. Then she told my father: "Send her for the Junior Teachers' Training and when she will have finished we shall see what to do with her." My father was not of the opinion of sending me for the Training, he rather preferred that I should continue higher studies. However, that look of Sr. Rina had conquered me and I, almost unconsciously, found myself trying to convince my father to send me for the Training just as Sr. Rina had said.

"Sr. Rina looked pleased with my stand and said: 'Don't worry about anything . I shall write to Sr. Gina, the Superior of Jowai Training School, and all will be alright. Inspite of strong opposition from my uncles I went to Jowai and when I reached the Convent and presented myself to the Superior, I found that she knew everything about me and even more, that she was waiting for me there.

"The school started and seemingly I gave no second thought to Sr. Rina. One day as we were in the playground the news of her death was given. I was stunned and thought about it for a long time. At night I dreamt of Sr. Rina, who was pointing her finger to me and saying: "You must join us ! You must take my place."

I got up with the scene deeply impressed in my mind and could never get rid of it. Soon after my training I went to the Sisters with a mind to join them. Although we children had already being baptised, our parents were not yet Christians: they too received baptism. If today I am happy Daughter of Mary

Help of Christians I owe it to Sr. Rina, who is till my guide and help in everyday's little difficulties and trials."

Vocations and family spirit

Sr. Rina considered most productive of vocations what Don Bosco had already proclaimed as infallible means: family spirit among the Sisters themselves and among Sisters and pupils. On this subject her own example was the best sermon: she would take great pains to see that nobody felt out of place in her community. She could not bear to see sad faces: at once she would enquire about the cause for the difficulties that might have arisen. She would always be ready to offer her mediation to bring about peace and understanding in the family. At all times she would be ready to put herself into any inconvenience if that would help relieve tensions and bring about friendliness. But what helped more in fostering vocations was her positive outlook at life in religion. She thought it herself and she preached to others that there could be nothing more joyful and rewarding by both human and supernatural standards than a life spent for God and for the good of our neighbour. She always thought that the young are generous and they need to be given great ideals, then only would they see a meaning in religious life. This is necessary both for promoting new vocations as well as for motivating religious to perseverance in vocation.

"With Sr. Rina," says one of the Sisters who lived several years with her, "there was never a dull moment. Religious life in her communities was high-spirited: you could not be a mediocre religious. Among the Sisters and even among the girls there would be striving for sancity and service. Sometimes she would have to restrain us from going too far, either in our practice of mortification or excessive time in prayer."

All this speaks of her continual efforts to bring back to her communities the spirit of Mornese with its fervour, simplicity and humility, its dedication and poverty, but especially with that joy and happiness, which are the fruit of God's presence and mutual love.

To the communities in which Sr. Rina was present, we can aptly apply what was said of Mornese at the time of Mother Mazzarello: "The joys of heaven were not only spoken of there, but also foretasted."



9. Mornese again

If Mornese stands for the place of 'origins', it stands better for the place where the Salesion spirit, as lived by Mother Mazzarello and her first Sisters, flourished through a life of love of God and Mary, of mutual understanding and care, of fervent prayers and unceasing work, of poverty and renunciation, of simplicity and spontaneous joy. It was so then: it is so now for any house of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who want to live the spirit of the origins.

Nongthymmai—Shillong

When everything looked so wonderful in Bandel—a new spacious building with a vast compound well walled and secure, a large group of pre-aspirants, an ever increasing number

of children in the school, a charitable dispensary for the poor, an oratory for the children of the locality and, above all, a fervent religious community—Sr. Rina was asked to leave it in order to take over the construction of Auxilium Convent, Nongthymmai (Shillong). She really felt it very much, because she had to leave all those dear people and things, and also because she had to leave Our Lady of Bandel, whom she had come to love very filially. It was Our Lady who had carried her through the difficult moments of her stay in Bandel: it was to her that Sr. Rina attributed the little successes she had achieved. Farewell to Bandel!

Nongthymmai Auxilium Convent, according to the project of the 'daring and trustful' Mother Mania, was to be the centre of the Northern Province of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians—a glorious vision to be sure! But it had to be built from scratch. Sr. Rina was chosen for this seemingly impossible work. While the construction work was in progress, not having a suitable place to stay in Nongthymmai, Sr. Rina would reside in Mawlai Convent. It meant rising very early in the morning, participating in an early Mass in the parish church, having a quick breakfast and then proceeding on foot to a place two miles away, where she could get a bus, in the company of a girl who would be her companion, cook and helper for the day. After the morning's strenuous trip she would reach the place of work to start her day's duty with the workers and brick-layers. The only time she would be able to sit down was for the mid-day meal, on a stone, which would be lying around the place.

With the workers

To encourage the workers she would work with them: from early morning to late evening she would be seen carring

stones, mixing mortar, levelling the ground. When she was not there, she would be running errands in town to provide materials and permits for the construction. Knowing that she had to complete quikly a colossal work, she could not dream of rest. Often while the workers would stop for a time to take rest, she would take their place and do the work without scolding them: she knew that they were tired, they were poor and perhaps they had come to work without proper food. These labourers, seeing her work so hard, would quickly get back to their places and resume work with a view to sparing her extra work. After a laborious day, in rain or sun, she would make her trip home the same way she had come, often in pitch darkness.

She followed this way of life regularly for several months until, with Fr. Guido's help, Mother Mania secured an old car for the works at Nongthymmai. It was a good purchase for all its poor looks. It certainly was a big blessing for Sr. Rina and for the progress of the works: she could now move faster and transport materials without having to depend on outside help. In gratitude to her superiors and to God, Sr. Rina would exclaim: 'I think I am now the most fortunate lady in Shillong.' Really, one would not think so after a look at that "third-hand" car. However, a little incident will illustrate how dangerous it was for Sr. Rina without it.

Once while she was returning from Nongthymmai in the dark, in a lonely place she felt she was being followed by a man. At first to boost her courage and that of her young companion, she began reciting the Rosary aloud and at the same time quickened her steps downhill. But noticing that the man too was moving faster and was almost upon them, she courageously turned back all of a sudden and shouted at him: 'Stop! What do you think you are doing? If you come any closer

you will see what will happen.' The man stopped, looked around for a while and then disappeared into the darkness. Sr. Rina attributed this to the protection of Our Lady whose rosary they were reciting. The path was dangerous and was avoided after dusk. It was but natural that Sr. Rina should be afraid. All the more so since she had heard so much about the fearful happenings in that lonely spot: about 'nongshanos', paid assassins, who were said to draw out, by a syringe, blood from their victims for sacrificial offerings to devils. The car proved useful for such situations and did much to allay her fears.

The happiness of work

The arrival of the van certainly lessened the fatigue of the daily journey up and down. Yet Sr. Rina's hard life in Nongthymmai continued with the same rhythm, as she thought the completion of the building was a pressing need. In the convent at Mawlai the community had grown from 22 to 32 Sisters and novices. The Province needed more and better equipped space for its centre. An English medium school had been requested by the people of the place and the existing Khasi school had to be extended. The construction work went on with such speed that, to the suprise of all, in less than one and a half years a spacious concrete building rose on a spot where once there were only rocks and stones.

Thinking about her activities and busy days, one may get the impression that Sr. Rina might have developed a superiocity complex or at least an inclination for aloofness from the community and from Superiors. The following excerpt from Mother Mania's account convinces us of the contrary. She writes:

"On arriving every evening she would lightly knock at,

open my door and say her cheerful "Viva Gesu', Mother. We are back!" Then she would go and have a well-deserved cup of tea, and return to give an account of the day. Nothing betrayed her extreme tiredness. The cheerful way in which she narrated the little or big adventures of the day was very entertaining. I am afraid that many times I must have failed to understand the need to make things a little easier for this most active worker of the Lord. When some purchases had to be made, the next day she would have her list ready, not so much to receive the money, as to have an approval. Sr. Rina could get anything on credit. Once she herself reported having overheard a Marwari from whom she had bought something on credit, remarking to a friend: "These are more than reliable people. I would give them my shop on credit." She expressed her need (or even the workers') with utmost simplicity.

"Dear, dear Sr. Rina! Sometimes she reported requests that she thought we should comply with. Sometimes she had sad stories to report, and sometimes very amusing ones which, a little later, would greatly enliven the community recreation. One evening Bah'Cus, the driver, had to stop by the side of the Mawlai road as there was a big row in the middle of the road. All jumped down from the van "to see". Two young men, each with a sack of stolen cackling hens, had been caught. These helpless rowdies, relieved of their booty, were pushed and pulled to a small courtyard along the roadside where "Khasi Justice" began. The whole neighbourhood came to have their say, and administer a blow or two to the culprits. Bah'Cus probably slapped their faces. Sr. Rina gave each a good pat on the back. She was so amused by the scene."

'Contagious' enthusiasm

During the construction of Nonthymmai Novitiate, more

than the work, one was struck by the animating spirit that supported it—something that 'contagiously' spread from one to another in all those who came to share the 'zeal for God's house' of Sr. Rina. Sr. Marykutty had something precious to say about those days. "From 13th June 1957 till we actually occupied our house, I was provileged to be the constant companion of Sr. Rina and could see the way she was doing



things. Quite frequently in those days the novices, postulants and aspirants would go to give a helping hand. The untiring, unceasing example of work given us by Sr. Rina

brought about in us also a love for hard work, which was altogether new and astonishing . Hard manual labour was something unusual and unfamiliar to us, since all we did at home was to give a hand in the household work. Instead here we wanted to imitate Sr. Rina and even outdo her. We threw ourselves headlong into our work: from morning till evening we carried soil, stones and were at the beck and call of everybody who needed our help. The scene of Mornese was re-enacted, not on a stage, but in reality. As days went by our enthusiasm increased. Later on, referring to those days Mother Provincial would tell us: "Yes, each one of you can say: I have built this house!"

Sr. Rina's hard work was so impressive and edifying that it caught the attention not only of her religious Sisters, but of all who saw her in those days. One of the workers of that time writes: "When the construction of Nongthymmai was going on, we the people of the area, encouraged by the women of Catholic Action, used to go to work realizing that it was a a good work for the area. Sr. Rina used to work with us. She would take the heavy hammer and break rocks, dig the ground with the rest of us—she would act like one of us workers, not showing at all that she was the Superior." A woman of those days writes: "My acquaintance with Sr. Rina began when I was fourteen. At that time she was coming to supervise the works at Nongthymmai. She was a very hard-working Sister and had a knack and taste for construction work.

"There was something so spectacular and signficant in her which, so to say, acted as magic on others. The workers loved and esteemed her very much and never tired to shirk work by hiding away or lazily sitting down during work; besides she used to work with them. She used to mix the

mortar, shovel it and load it for the workers. She would pick up stones and place them on our shoulders. She herself used to carry heavy stones. She also taught us to pray while we worked: she taught us to say the Rosary and ejaculations while our hands were busy, thus making our work very effective spiritually and materially too—in fact when we prayed we worked faster and better. Often she would take me to the market and shops to collect material. While we waited for things to arrive, we would say the Rosary or these ejaculations: 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph ! Jesus, I love you: save souls!' "

"Work and temperance !"

Regarding her attitude to work, Fr. Tomas Karthik states: "The first time I met Sr. Rina was in 1957 when I was a novice. We had come with Fr. Bacchiarello, our novice-master, for a picnic to Nongthymmai. Sr. Rina was then in charge of the construction of that convent. I saw her with sleeves rolled up clearing a heap of stones that was lying on the path leading to the house. My spontaneous thought then was: 'How hard this Sister works!' Now I think: 'Would Mary Mazzarello have worked harder than she even in her own healthier days ?"

Mrs. Anna Maria Synkren, now a senior nurse in the Military Hospital of Guahati, writes: "Sr. Rina was a hard working Sister, who never thought of herself, but only of God and souls. During the construction of Auxilium Nonthymmai I would watch her working all day with the people, eating very little and spending all the time with us. She used to help anybody in need, especially by employing them in work when they asked for it. I am one who was helped by her in many ways, even from the days of Jowai, where I had been taken in the boarding as on orphan. Thank you, Sr. Rina." How many have repeated these great words 'Thank you, Sr.

Rina' for what she had been for them through her care and love, but especially through her spiritual guidance and example.

According to the inspiration of Don Bosco, the Salesians have "Work and temperance" as their motto. We have surely been struck by the spirit of work of Sr. Rina, but she would not live this Salesian characteristic half-heartedly. She was equally a model of temperance throughout her life. We have had already the oppportunity to note that while God had given her a good appetite, for various reasons often in her life she was unable to satisfy it. It is edifying to see how she bore her disappointments in a spirit of temperance, examplary mortification and even heroic self-denial.

An episode during the construction of Nongthymmai Convent reveals this truth about her. Once she had invited her brother, Fr. Dino, to see her work and to join her for the midday meal at the site. Accordingly she had requested Sr. Agnes Khurkalang, who used to prepare daily her tiffin-carrier at Mawlai, to put in an extra portion for that day. At meal time she felt very sorry to see that in the tiffin-carrier there was hardly food enough for one person. Anyhow she shared the meal with Fr. Dino, who did not fail to notice this, and asked to be more careful about her meals and eat a little more if she wanted to live. In the evening Sr. Rina questioned Sr. Agnes about what she considered her forgetfulness. Sr. Agnes, who narrated this episode, told Sr. Rina that she had definitely prepared abundant food for three persons and in fact showed her what she had prepared for that day and what she was giving daily for her and her girl companion. On enquiry it was found that the girl, who always took her meals before Sr. Rina, was helping herself abundantly, leaving a small portion for the latter. And this had been going on for months, not just that particular day. A wonderful example

of Sr. Rina's temperance and mortitication! Was the repentent girl dismissed from work, or even punished ? Not at all. Rather, Sr. Rina continued to keep her as her companion with more food, which they would now share equally.

United achievement

Speaking of the construction of the Auxilium complex at Nongthymmai and attributing its success to one single person, would be the worst thing that could be said about Sr. Rina, who always considered it as the result of the work of very many individuals. One of the most deep-rooted convictions of Sr. Rina was that the strength of the Sisters was in their working together. She would often repeat: "Our strength is in our union. When we work together we achieve wonders. When we work individually we destroy. Let no one say 'she' or 'me', but let us feel as one. The Lord rewards the efforts of those who work together with their Sisters and Superiors." (Reported by Sr. Tilde Galli.)

Sr. Cleofe adds: "Sr. Rina would despise popularity. Regarding success she would say: 'We have worked together and consequently we achieved success. After God we have to be grateful to all our Sisters. I really do not understand why they should praise me, who am but a simple Daughter of Mary Help of Christians."

Incidently we quote here what Mother Mania wrote about Sr. Rina's popularity. "It was exactly the popularity she enjoyed that was the cause of much misunderstanding of her ways and aims, and hence of long and intense suffering to her, especially when certain visitors were kept away from her when she was very ill."

Auxilium, Nongthymmai was in fact first and foremost the fruit of the faith of many, but especially of all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Assam under the courageous leadership of Mother Mania then Provincial. Sr. Rina was above all the expression of that faith and courage of her Sisters and of all those persons who followed that institution with love and expectation. Among these Bishop Ferrando stood first.

Rt. Rev. Stephen Ferrando SDB, Bishop of Shillong, was an ardent admirer of Sr. Rina and the Salesian Sisters, and their great benefactor and father.

The blessing of the new building

On 8th January 1958 Bishop Ferrando went to offer the first Mass in Auxilium Convent for the Sisters and novices who the previous day had gone there to complete the immediate preparation for the blessing. The same Bishop Ferando blessed the new building on 24th January amid the general participation of Superiors and Sisters, of Priests and Religious and of the people of Shillong. Filled with deep joy and gratitude mingling with the crowds was Sr. Rina. To those who kept on congratulating her she would reply: "It is the work of Our Lady and of so many humble and devoted labourers." Here we have to add something for those who, impressed by the external achievements of Sr. Rina, may think of her only as a great builder or good social worker without the deep spirituality which corroborated all her activities.

The authoritative statements of Mother Mania will disclose to us Sr. Rina's spiritual depth. "As in Bandel so also in Nonthymmai," writes Mother Mania, "the years of the new constructions were for Sr. Rina years of intense work,

heroic sacrifices, privations and humiliations. But good Sr. Rina never minded sacrifices, never cared for rest. The necessary material for the building was never wanting: I attribute it to the faith, prayers and sacrifices of Sr. Rina, who offered everything to God with great joy, never allowing anybody to discover her sufferings. Ah, that broad smile of hers, open as a rose to the dew and the morning sun! It made us think of a soul always in festal mood (un'anima sempre in festa). Sr. Rina was always open to joy: she always rejected sadness!"

"How much she had to walk from Mawlai to Nongthymmai and back every day. But never a complaint from Sr. Rina. When at last we could provide her with an old station-wagon, how grateful she was! She called herself 'the most fortunate lady in Shillong'. Often she would call to Nongthymmai the aspirants and postulants for some urgent work, that needed to be finished in time. I myself found her working like anybody else, as if she had to earn her livelihood for the family. She always kept for herself the heaviest portion of the work because, she used to say, she had larger shoulders....I have only spoken of what could be seen about her, but there would be so much more about her that only the good Lord knows and is written in Heaven. I wish to conclude by saying that Sr. Rina never, never made a show of her sacrifices, neither would she speak of her work or have people appreciate her good deeds. She was always ready to say 'Yes' to God, to her Superiors, to souls, to whatever was good. Even when she was left alone by her supporters, she did not fear. She went ahead thinking that when human helpers fail, divine help will be even more abundant."

A tribe of appreciation

In recognition of her untiring work and constant care,

her Superiors appointed her as the first Superior of this institution, which still needed to be nursed into the centre of direction and spirituality, of salesian activity and social sevice which is now. Auxilium Convent Nongthymmai has served as a novitiate up to 1976 when it was moved to Bellefonte. It is the spiritual power-house of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians through retreats, courses, seminars, assemblies and get-togethers. It is the Provincial House of the Sisters' Northern Province. But besides all that, it embraces a number of activities which are typical of any Salesian complex: schools (English and Vernacular), youth centre, oratory with all the activities connected with these work, such as sodalities, youth work, house visiting and the like. All these spiritual, apostolic and humanitarian activities which started with Sr. Rina, still go on bringing fruits of piety, zeal and service.

Spontaneous reflection

Great and important works have strong and rich personalities as their originating and animating principle. When we consider the complex activities of Auxilium Nongthymmai, we are bound to think of great Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who have worked at its origin and have nurtured it up to the present position. Just to mention only those, who have gone to their eternal reward, we have to recal persons such as Mother Avio, Mother Mania and others. Surely together with them we have to remember Sr. Rina. Many of her Sisters feel that she had in fact a robust personality of her own, which not only in the case of Nongthymmai and its community, but also in all other cases, would attract persons to herself and master even difficult situations in a wonderful way, always to the glory of God and the good of souls.

We quote here a meaningful declaration of Sr. Cathe-

rine Susngi FMA who expressed beautifully, what others have said or written on the same topic. She writes: "I had the occasion of being acquainted with Sr. Rina since when I was quite young. One thing I cannot forget about her is that she possessed a strong irresistible force which attracted everyone. She did not have any extraordinary external show of her religiosity. Yet we, even as girls, felt that she had something about her, which we could not describe. Was it her broad winning smile? Or her kindness? Was it her way of relating to people ? Or her big heart ? Yes, it was all that but not only that ! It was something very deep, something that explained, nay, that was the root-cause of that smile, that kindness, that readiness to listen and sympathize, that very big heart.

"We were happy just to be near her, to feel her soft broad hand on our head or shoulder. Oh, it was something marvellous to be noticed by her, to be touched by Sr. Rina !

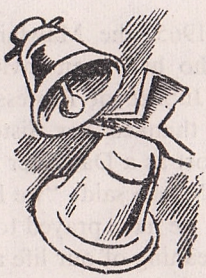
"Well, at a distance of 25 years and more, I can convincingly affirm that Sr. Rina is 'the Sr. Rina I know and admire', because she was totally possessed by the Spirit of God, and she in turn possessed him totally. No one otherwise would have been able to explain her evenness of character, her constant serenity and smile, even in the midst of adversities and trials inherent to the first years of the Province and to persons whom God had placed on her way to purify her as gold is purified in the crucible.

"This is the Sr. Rina I know—the religious who found no difficulty too big, no suffering too great, no misunderstanding or indifference beyond endurance, because she believed strongly that being a religious is being espoused to the Cruci-

fied Christ who fills the souls with an internal ir explicable joy and serenity in the midst of all tribulations."

"To conclude, Superior Rira was a GIANT OF GOODNESS ! I intentio ally called her Superior, not because she was keen to have that title before her name, but because of the moral and spiritual superiority she possessed and unassumingly, perhaps even unknowingly, exercised over those she came in contact with.

"She is one of those rare personalities we can look at and admire from different angles: the wider the angle, the more we discover the marvels the Lord has worked in her."



10. A Home

On 5th August 1965, the Mawlai community together with other Sisters, who had been invited for the occation, celebrated the Silver Jubilee of Profession of Sr. Rina. On that occasion as she thanked her Sisters she expressed what had been her main effort as a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians:. "Dear Sisters", she said, "we have lived together, we have worked together, we have prayed together, we have loved together: this is the meaning of our life as Religious. For this the good Lord has called us together." Almost at the end of her short life, she had tried to sum up what in her opinion had been her ideal; in fact, what she had tried to achieve with her Sisters: to build a family, to create a home. We feel like listening to Mother Mazzarello's constant reminders to her Sisters, and what she kept repeating with motherly care in all

her letters. She loved her Sisters, she cared for their material and spiritual welfare. It was in this tender care for her Sisters that Sr. Rina imitated Mother Mazzarello best.

Peace, a treasure

Wherever she was as Sister Superior, Sr. Rina was always the source of peace and joy in the community. Already as a young Sister she had this in mind. "After a Retreat" narrates a companion of hers, "a group of young Sisters had gathered to speak about the virtue we thought the most necessary and dear to Our Lady in our communities. After everybody had said her own opinion, Sr. Rina remarked with deep conviction: "I think joyous peace is the most important virtue of our communities....How happy we feel when peace reigns among us !' Later on she became my superior and I could see that this was what she was practicing and was telling others to practice. She saw that peace and sisterly love would never be broken, especially when difficulties would arise due to character differences. She herself would always keep a happy and cheerful conversation. But when necessary she knew how to correct too-She would do it privately as far as possible. She would try to foresee and prevent what was unpleasant, but without forcing her way through. So much so that we thought it was natural for her to be so good and kind. But we could see that all this was the fruit of her interior life and a constant effort to better herself. That is why at her death-hour she could say she had done everything for the Lord." (From the Archives of the Northern Province of India).

"Sr. Rina", adds Sr. Cleofe, "had a generous heart: she loved all her Sisters equally well and with deep respect for the person. For this reason, all the Sisters found her a welcoming Superior, always ready to receive, to listen. Just by coming

close to her they could find comfort and peace. She would suffer if someone would not correspond to her care. How sad, she would be 'if we really were not to forgive and forget! She would say: If we love the good Lord, we shall do every thing to please him, even the greatest sacrifices will be easy then.' She would give the example in this. She would be always ready to forgive and forget generously, joyfully, unmindfully: rather she would love even more than before. I can say that in her we could see the goodness of the Lord, of Don Bosco and of Mother Mazzarello: perhaps the years she passed near the birth-places of our Saints as a young Sister had helped her to drink in also their spirit and way of life."

"Everybody agrees," says Sr. Mary Riva "that Sr. Rina had a great and good heart. Her smile, her sincere way of talking, her very presence would make people happy. We would feel at ease in her company, there would be no fear, no apprehension. Everyone would feel she was the most cared by her, the most loved. With her Sisters she would be very understanding, but at the same time she would stimulate them to perfection. On a certain feast-day in Mawlai a group of Superiors had gathered for a chat, which little by little grew into a high-pitched discussion. One of them somewhat offended by what had been said, got up to move out. Sr. Rina stopped her and in a gentle manner, yet pointedly remarked: 'Sister, we should strive to keep calm even when we feel offended..' This made me think that her constant and cool peaceful demeanour was the fruit of repeated efforts on her part. It is true that God had given her many natural gifts, but it is equally true that she made the best use of them."

The Younger Sisters

Sr. Rina showed particular love and care for the Younger Sisters. She found it natural: they needed to be trained and

brought up carefully if they were to become generous religious. Many of them had been her girls or aspirants or postulants or novices. She knew them individually, she knew their families, she liked to call them and apportion to them duties and chores according to their capabilities. Yet never would she spoil them by excessive protection. Rather, all of them felt that she



required from them work, duty, and sometimes even heroic sacrifices when charity, the rules and religious life were at stake. One of them says: "Sr. Anne Ward, a model of poverty would often complain about us, young Sisters, to Sr. Rina,

our superior, saying that we were thoughtless and careless and that in doing our duties we showed no interest and so on. Sr. Rina would listen to her patiently and carefully and then she would note: 'Sr. Anne, they are young, just starting their religious life. So it is our duty to train them kindly and gently.' At the same time she would call the younger Sisters and remind them of the remarks of Sr. Anne."

Her motherly love prompted her to be always with her Sisters. At times if she could not see a Sister for a few hours, she enquired about her and on having found her she would gently ask: "Where were you at such a time? I missed you." "She was always with the Sisters at recreation, prayer, meals, work, as the soul of those happy moments of "family" life in the community. Nothing would keep her away from them unless urgent duties were not over. Anyone could approach Sr. Rina anytime with any problem and she would always be available to give a helping, to say a word of encouragement and to solve a difficulty.

Sr. Marisa Rota had just come from Italy. After spending a few days in Mawlai, she was appointed assistant of the novices: the unexpected resposibility frightened her. As she met Sr. Rina, who was the Superior, she just threw herself weeping in her arms. Sr. Rina received her in her motherly embrace and with her encouraging words and advice dispelled all apprehension and fear from the Sister's heart.

An understanding superior

"My first assignment was Bandel." Narrates Sr. Magdalene Caspani FMA. "In October 1945 I came from Mawlai to Calcutta apprehensive of what would be in store for me. At the station I was welcomed by my Superior, Sr. Rina, who

coming near to me whispered: 'Cheer up, Sister, we will be happy together !' It was as if she had read into my heart. I was reassured. We went together to Bandel, where I was given plenty of work, especially in the dispensary. Many people would come for medicine and when the rush was great Sr. Rina would be there to help me. On Chrismas day she gave me a picture on the back-side of which she had written: 'Jesus loves you, because you love the poor!' It was a motto for me: I knew that she was giving me an example of love for the poor. With Sr. Rina we felt happy and secure. She was, both with herself and others, always calm and serene, no harshness or bad manners with her. I was young and inexperienced, so she taught and guided me with love, but at the same time with firmness, especially in the observance of the rules and obedience. But all the while we felt she wanted our good and so we would be ready to do anything to please her. Bandel was heaven with her.

"In Bandel I contracted a serious allergy that for over a year would not allow me to sleep at night . How much Sr. Rina did for my cure. She herself suffered for it and wept, as if it were her own sickness. She would provide for me the most costly medicines, even if at the time we were really without means. How many traits of her kindness would I be able to recount ! Knowing that I and Sr. Amelia were not well, she arranged that we should come from Shillong by plane. But due to bad weather we had to suffer much during the flight. As we moved out of the plane, there was Sr. Rina, who had come to pick us up and taking us both by the arm, brought us to the conveyance that was waiting for us. Well there was so much gentleness in her charity and care, that, without fear of disparaging anybody, I can affirm that in my religious life I did not find any other superior as kind and thoughtful as Sr. Rina was. How delicately gentle would she be with the sick

Sisters: she would sometimes go herself to the kitchen to ask the Sister in charge to prepare food, according to their tastes: often she would bring that food herself to the sick person.

Gentle and kind

In the cold weather of Shillong she would see that the Sisters had proper clothing: in the first days of Nonghtymmai with the new building which was still damp after the recent contruction, she would go to the dormitories of the Sisters and see that each had enough blankets. She was sure not to send to the common washing her clothes, especially the handkerchiefs, stocking and underwear, without having washed them herself first. She would tell her Sisters to do the same out of consideration for the others. In her sickness when she would not be able to wash her things anymore she said to a Sister: "Please, Sr. Mary, do me the favour of washing my handkerchiefs now. I shall return this charity to you when you will be sick."

When she had gone to Italy in 1964, she also visited Sr. Tilde Galli's family to remonstatre to her sister how Sr. Tilde was not receiving any letters from her. "How can I write", said the sister, "when I know that you, Superiors, open my letters before giving them to my sister ?" Sr. Rina assured her that this would never happen. When she came back to India she explained to Sr. Tilde: "The (old) rules say that the superior 'may', not 'must' open the letters of the Sisters. So from today be sure you will receive your letters sealed. Sr. Tilde continues: " Even before that Sr. Rina was extremely delicate on this point: she would bring the letters closed and in front of the Sisters she would just open them and hand them over to educate the Sisters". With such gentle manners and attention Sr. Rina would win the hearts of her Sisters, who loved her immensely and sincerely."

Love for the Congregation

It was surely the love for the Sisters and the Congregagation that made Sr. Rina spend her best energies in the works assigned to her by obedience with a dedication that can be called heroic. The constructions at Tezpur, Bandel, Nongthymmai and Mawlai, besides having the scope for which they were built, were in her view also to provide a more decent place for her Sisters. One frequent problem a large community of Sisters faces is the washing and drying of clothes. Wherever she would build, she would think of that, as in Nongthymmai. Another problem is running water. How much did she do to provide it in Mawlai and in Nongthymmai. And when, because of the increased number of Sisters, who would come for the Retreats, water would run short, she was the first to get up at four o'clock in the morning to carry buckets of water for the Sisters. Her example as Superior would invite the other Sisters of the community to come to help her.

Sr. Rina's love for the Sisters was not restricted to those of her community. Every Sister felt her love and care. When the Sisters would go to her house for the Retreat, she would gather the community and exhort them to be extremely serviceable and kind to them, saying that they were coming there from the extremely hot plains and needed rest and comfort, but especially friendly love. She would infallible send the van to pick them up at the bus-stand and welcome them individually at the door. If she came to know that someone had suffered on account of the journey, she would bring them to the refectory and restore them with some drink.

"Oh those wonderful welcoming words of hers !" says Sr. Cleofe. "Every time we would go to Nongthymmai there she was with her big smile and the "Welcome, Sisters. Viva

Gesu". We felt all the discomfort of the journey disappear. In a moment we felt at home. There she would be around taking our suit-case and baggage and bringing them to our assigned places". "All throughout the Retreats or the course," adds another sister, "we could feel her always around asking if we needed anything and especially the sickly Sisters would receive special attention. Nothing would be wanting to anybody. No wonder that on the departure from her community we would feel sorry, as if we had been with her for a very long time.'

For the novices

Needless to say, Sr. Rina extended the same care and affection for the Sisters-to-be, the novices. At Nongthymmai she was also Superior of the Novitiate, which had Sr. Francesca Martina then as Mistress of the Novices. "Sr. Rina," relates Sr. Martina," could arouse enthusiasm in everybody around her, in the children, in the workers, in the teachers, in her Sisters. What beautiful feasts we had with her with singing and music and every thing that would make us happy. But behind all this she would aim at the spiritual good of everybody who would come in contact with her. How many times would she come to speak to the novices and ask them to pray for this or that intention, for this or that person." When Sr. Martina was transferred, Sr. Rina had to take over for some time the care and direction of the Novices. She took this as an opportunity to inspire these young souls with the desire for sanctity according to the spirit and mind of Mother Mazzarello. She loved the novices, but at the same time she would be firm with them as the following episode reveals.

Sr. Mary Sarkar relates: "During my novitiate Sr. Rina was our Superior. Although we had our Novice Mistress,

we used to go often to Sr. Rina for advice and inspiration. Since we loved her very much, we would find excuses just for the sake of having a chance to meet her. During our singing classes, she would come to join us in the singing since she could sing any part, specially the third voice. She would insist that we should sing well and learn music, because that would be a means to love God and to be useful to our children. During our novitiate our Novice Mistress was transferred and so for some time Sr. Rina was our Acting Mistress. We were very happy for this opportunity. But I shall remember this time for a special lesson I recieved from Sr. Rina: it was a correction for which I shall be always grateful to her.

"During the Novitiate as I was not keeping too well. I was asked to take an egg every morning. When my Novice Mistress went away I stopped taking the egg thinking it was no more necessary. Sister Assistant informed Sr. Superior about it. So Sr. Rina called me. I was happy to go to her. But this time when I entered her room, I saw that she was unusually serious. She told me to sit down and she asked all about me and my health, then she came to the point. 'You had been told to take an egg daily and you cannot stop taking it unless you are told. Health is a very precious gift of God, which belongs to him and to the Congregation. So it is your duty to keep healthy and strong. Don't you realize that if you are not keeping well, you are not going to make your profession? Then perhaps seeing my bewilderment she added: 'Anyhow I know that you are going to get as strong as me and that you will work in the Congregation for many years.' In so saying she smiled and patting me on my shoulder she sent me to my work. At that moment not knowing what to say or what to do, I just went out without asking pardon. So the following day I went back to her to apologise. But she re-assured me that all had been forgotten and that I should

be at peace. After that she went on talking of many wonderful things."

With her Superiors

Sr. Rina's love for her Sisters and the Institute reached heroic levels especially in her relation with Superiors. She loved them filially, she spoke of them enthusiastically, she defended them energetically. She had the privilege of spending ten years, first as novice and then as a young religious, very close to the Major Superiors. Being a very keen observer of people, she learnt from them to be what she thought was best in her life as Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. For them she had veneration, respect and love that knew no limits. She treasured their letters and circulars, which she would read and meditate on and then explain to the communities. News from the centre was news of the family. She would write to Superiors and ask their advice which she would follow to the letter. Immense was her joy when they would come to India as visitors. She encouraged her Sisters not only to love and venerate them, but to keep in touch with them, to write to them especially for feasts and special celebrations.

Towards the end of her life, in 1964, she had the opportunuty to go to Italy and on that occasion she went to visit the Superiors in Turin. At that time she was suffering terribly not only physically but more mentally because of grave misunderstandings. On meeting the Major Superiors she was extremely relieved and consoled at the reception she had from them. On that occasion in a letter to Sr. Tilde she wrote: "Do you know, Sister? The Superiors love me as before. To them I am still the same Sr. Rina. In their eyes I am not 'bad' as some would think of me. They understood me and believed me." That was what gave her new enthusiam and

renewed joy in the moral and physical pains she was experiencing.

Love that matters

Sr. Rina had been great when she had found love and understanding in her Superiors, but she had been greater still—heroic—when, perhaps due to human frailties, such as incomprehension, jealousy and even calumny, God allowed



her to be misunderstood by some of them. She always remembered well Mother Pozzi, her superior as postulant; Sr. Innocente Borzini, her Novice-mistress, the Superiors of Casa Madre Mazzarello. She venerated her first superiors in India: Sr. Clotilde Appiano of Jowai days, and Sr. Cecilia of Mawlai.

She was extremely thankful to God for her Provincials in India: Mother Teresa Merlo, so considerate and kind; Mother Catherine Mania, who was for her not only a superior but also a mother; Mother Cesira Gallina, who helped her to complete detatchment and sanctity. From the moment Sr. Rina met Mother Mania in Tezpur, she understood that God had sent a suitable Superior for the good of the incipient Province of Northern India and a sure guide in her life as Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

Sr. Rina placed herself completely in the hands of her Provincial: she was ready to do whatever she wanted from her. But what was more admirable in her was that Mother Provincial was looked upon by her as her example and model, guide and support in her spiritual life. Even when Mother Mania ceased to be her Provincial, Sr. Rina continued to open her mind and heart to her as is testified by letters written to her in some of the most dramatic moments of her life. When she had realized that cancer would lead her to a quick death and at the same time she was asked to keep on as Superior. in those days Sr. Rina suffered very much because of misunderstandings. Here is part of a letter she wrote to Mother Mania.

'Viva Gesu` !' **Mawlai 15.11.1965**

Ever dearest Mother Provincial,

Sister Catherine tells me that I should write to you and that I should wish you a "Happy Feast" and all that follows. I heard that you have not been keeping well of late. Well, I know you have never been keeping too well and that makes me sad too. How are you now ? Now that I have suffered rather intensely in these recent months, I too can understand what it means not to be in good health. I have been thinking

of you very much and since I can do little for you, at least I have remembered you often in my prayers. May the Lord help you. I came to know from Mother Provincial that you have had several sick Sisters in your province. In short I can really say that your cross is very heavy. Courage, my very dear Mother Provincial ! How often I think of your phrase 'Within fifty years..' Do you still remember in which occasion you were telling me that ? Now that your six years as Provincial of the Madras Province are coming to an end..Well, I hope you will not be sent very far away.

As you already know I am here at Mawlai since July last. I do not know what to say about myself..I feel better in many ways, yet there is still something that does not go well. The Lord does not send only one cross at a time and so I try to pluck up courage by thinking that Heaven is beautiful !

You tell me about our Sr. Luigina a dear saint she is! How many merits must she have gained by bearing so much pain for so many years! Here we have with us our dear Sr. Antonietta, a real 'lightning-conductor' for our house. She prays for you..(and then she mentions all the other Sisters in the community). In everything I do have a special prayer for you. Nothing has changed as regards my feeling towards you, to whom I owe so much. So my wishes this year are even more meaningful...Our Mother Provincial is very understanding towads me and she encourages me to pass this time with a spirit of abandonment to God's will ..Well, I am thinking of Heaven: how wonderful it will be! Excuse me for my outburst: I would have said so many other things if I had you near! Again 'Happy Feast'. May the Lord give you plenty of consolations and many graces. Keep me always as your daughter.

Affectionately,
Sr. Rina.

A model of humality

Besides being herself dutiful and respectful to her superiors, she instilled her love for them in her Sisters, as many of them attested. The following is a simple, yet meaningful example of it: so very Salesian in its manifestation. One of the Sisters of those days narrates: "When Mother Mania, our Provincial, returned from the General Chapter we gave her a grand reception. Sr. Rina wanted that this reception be a sign of veneration not only for the Provincial, but for all the Major Superiors with whom she had been during the General Chapter and whose voice she would interpret to us. All the months that Mother Provincial had been away, Sr. Rina and Mother Mistress spent all their free time with us to prepare a fitting welcome for her. Singing, drama, decorations, and above all true fidelity to our consecrated life would prepare us for the coming of our Superior."

The same Sister continues: " In those days fervour seemed the easiest thing in the company of such a Superior. With her shining example a mediocre life was almost impossible. I think that the degree of fervour in those days was at its highest." Another Sister refers: "I never remember her saying ever a word at variance with her superiors, even when she had to suffer a great deal for it. Once when we were at table Mother Provincial sitting in front of us publicly reproached her for a work which she had done with the greatest interest and attention. Not a word of excuse or of self-defence escaped from her lips: she remained quiet and silent. Her sensitive nature must have felt it very much since the reproach was done in front of her young Sisters. Needless to say, that rebuke did not lessen our esteem for her, rather her noble example increased a hundredfold our esteem and love for her. I remember that later on out of the refectory I approached her

and showed how I was sorry for what had happened. She was moved at such an expression of loyalty on my part, yet not even then did she say a word of reproval of the Superior or defence of herself."

Like Mother Mazzarello

On the same topic Sr. Cleofe has the following remarks, which prove not only Sr. Rina's attachment to her superiors, but also her extraordinary humility. "How many acts of humility" says she, "shone in Sr. Rina, even in the eyes of her younger Sisters: she kept her smile even in trying circumstances. We, the Sisters, esteemed her just because like Mother Mazzarello she humbled herself with great simplicity. Once she remarked to me: 'I am afraid I will not be able to take your place. I do not know what I will be able to do. But I must try to be what has been asked of me by obedience. Pray for me that the Lord help me.' She was very capable and her deep and sincere humility drew God's blessing on all her works. "All for God, nothing for me', she used to say."

Her sister Cecilia writes: "I admired Sr. Rina, but I could not understand her passionate love for her Institute and her Superiors, who at times seemed to me unreasonable. In 1964 she had come home for a quick visit. She had told me that she would remain home with me for two or three weeks, since she was not well and her Superiors in Turin had told her to remain at home until she got well . During the time she was always busy: she had gone also to Milan and Turin for check-ups. In the meantime she had collected a lot of things for her mission: the greater part of these things had been offered to her by benefactors and friends, She was so happy about these gifts, because, she said, they were very useful for her school and children. But she had been with us for scarcely a week

when she received a letter from her Superior in India, in which she was told to go back as soon as possible, and to collect and bring with her boxes of things that were lying in Turin. To our insistance to stay back for the time allotted to her and to take with her the many things she had collected, she said: "Obedience is more precious than anything and anybody." And she bid us her last fare-well leaving behind the greater part of the things she had thought so useful before.

Fr. Luciano adds: "I have been always very well edified by the way Sr. Rina thought and spoke about her Institute, her Superiors and Sisters, She had always words of veneration for the activities of her congreation. When I raised some objections regarding certain deficiencies in the persons or institute that I either saw or had heard about, she always confronted me with better views of the same. About her personal difficulties and misunderstandings which, only later on I came to know from others, were rather severe and unbearable, I never heard anything as a complaint from her: in fact I would have known nothing about these if others had not written or spoken to me about them."

A golden advice

Indeed she had practised that recommendation of St. John Bosco to his first missionaries that runs thus: "Love one another, advise one another, correct one another, and do not be carried away by either envy or rancour. Let the good of one become the good of all, and let the sufferings and troubles of one be regarded as the sufferings and troubles of of all. Let each one strive to banish or at least mitigate the sorrows of others."

11. The friend of all

"Sr. Rina loved eveybody and was loved by all." This statement was not said only by one person (Mother Mania), but was repeated by all those who came to know Sr. Rina. It could not be otherwise for a daughter of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. After the Heart of Jesus she would have liked to reach out to everybody and to came to the help of every human misery.

The poor and needy

Her first and best friends were the poor. Sr. Rina liked to recite this prayer regularly: "O Lord, teach me to love not so much myself, my people and those dear to me, but especially those whom nobody loves. Give me to understand that

every moment of joy and happiness I live, there are others, my brothers your children, who suffer want and starvation without any fault of theirs...who die in abandonment, because nobody cares for them. Do not allow me to be at peace, O Lord, if I cannot bring peace and joy to others."

Sr. Rina's love for the poor and the needy was her most practical expression of charity: she loved them because she saw Christ in them; she loved them because they needed to be loved. We may say that love for the poor was inborn in her, it grew under the tender care of her mother but it brought the best fruits when she became a religious. The first to be loved were definitely the poor and abandoned girls. It could not be otherwise for a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians: they were her life, they were her mission. In one of her first letters from India (Jowai 2.5.1948) she writes: I have come to a far away mission station but here too I have found my treasure (Italian: tesori), poor and abandoned girls..." In one of her letters (to Mrs. Wylie, 17.4.1966) she writes from the hospital "..pray that I may go back to my poor children in Mawlai.."

We have only to recall what has been written in the previous chapters to understand that all her life was spent in the service of the poor and abandoned youth, with a dedication that moves us to admiration. The years she spent in the oratories and schools in Italy, and later on in India were all for them. She intensified her care, service and love for them when she as superior could animate her communities to do everything for the poor and abandoned girls of her schools, boardings, oratories and missions. Even her constructions speak of love for them: she could not be at peace until she could give children some facilities and amenities that would help them grow into 'good christians and honest citizens'. The

intergral formation of the person was always in her mind: their material, intellectual and spiritual welfare.

But Sr. Rina's great heart embraced everybody: the lay-helpers, in her institutions, simple workers, neighbours in need. Her care reached out to benefactors and persons in public offices. She venerated, admired and loved religious and priests. The few examples we shall presently narrate will offer evidence to our statements.

For the lay-helpers

Bah'Cus had been a military driver during the second World War. It was all well with his driving but not with his habit of drinking. Fr. Foglia, the parish priest of the Cathedral in Shillong, to save him and his family, requested Sr. Rina to give him the driver's job, after explaining to her all about him. "Try to save him and his family", he concluded. Sr. Rina accepted him as driver, definitely with an aim to save his body and soul. She worked on a slow process, but he did come up to her expectations: an honest, sober, dutiful, religious Catholic. Sr. Rina thought of his children too, whom she educated up to respectable positions. As a sign of gratitude to Sr. Rina, Bah'Cus offered all his services to the community of Sisters. There was not a work which he would not do for them, at any time, from repairing things in the convent to helping at stage performances and always ready at his car for the conveyance of anybody who needed him. He himself summed up the fruits of Sr. Rina's care for him and his family, "I owe everything to her."

Another example: Robin Biswas had been brought from Krishnagar by Bro. Castelli as a simple labourer for the construction of Bandel. He was a sincere worker. Sr. Rina chose

him as driver of the house. But she had to prepare him for the job. She herself taught him English for a few months, sent him for the driving course and licence. He became a devoted worker always at the beck and call of the community and children.

Angelus Minj was a young Adivasi boy living with some members of his family, working in the nearby Bandel Church property. The Fathers allowed him to work also for Sr. Rina, thus giving him the chance of earning a little more. Good Bro. Castelli instructed Sr. Rina as well as Robin Biswas and Angelus Minj on how to put up a boundary wall and a little ground-floor terraced house to accomodate two small families. For this a secluded suitable place in the compound was chosen. It proved provindential in many ways. The two boys worked together with never a hitch, thanks to Sr. Rina who knew to show both much appreciation and encouragement to promote real, lasting friendliness. By the time the work was over, the house owned a small school-bus and Robin was the driver. Angelus on his part, could offer services as a 'mistry' to any contractor !

Once the main construction was completed, there were always some finishing touches to be cared for all around. So a good number of men and women used to come and work in the convent. She used to find work for many of them, also with the aim of providing them livelihood. As she moved about helping and encouraging them she used to enquire about their families, husbands and wives, parents and children, their financial and spiritual conditions. Many of these families were broken families, which needed care and attention in many ways. We could narrate many examples that prove Sr. Rina's love for the poor. Here are few of them.

The working class

Among those who took their daily wages from Sr. Rina,



there was a poor woman, mother of four children. She would

come to break stones for the construction of the Nonghthymmai convent. After a long day of fatiguing labour, she would return home, a poor hut. With what Sr. Rina had given her in cash and kind, she would prepare something for her needy starving children. Often as the supper got ready, there would arrive her ruthless, idle and drunkard hushand. If she could not satisfy his demands for more drinks, he would abuse her and often beat her. That poor victim bore all that with inexplicable patience. Once Sr. Rina came to know the fact, she sent for the man and gave him a good piece of her mind. She scolded him for his behaviour and irresponsible life, until she made him promise to turn over a new leaf. She employed him among the workers and the money which was his due was given to his wife so that she may be able to run the home a little better.

Some time later the woman was admitted in the hospital. There she passed away while giving birth to her fifth child. At that pitiable event Sr. Rina's sorrow knew no bounds. She wept, but did not stop at that . She arranged for a grand burial which that poor woman rightly deserved. Sr. Rina continued to follow up the family. She made sure that her husband took care of the children. She did all she could to provide them with whatever they needed. Later on, when she left Nongthymmai she sent the younger girl to the boarding at Sacred Heart Convent, Mawlai, the youngest boy was left with the father because the father seemed to have a special liking for him. The elder children were in a position to earn their own living. All the same, she saw to it that none of them lacked at least the necessities of life.

Another, almost similar story is narrated by Sr. Francesca Martina who writes: "Sr. Rina Colussi distinguished herself in her love for the poor, she knew how to see the Lord in

them. With what patience she would listen to their stories! She had the gift of participating in their sorrows in a concrete way by coming to their rescue in time of need.

"There was a woman in charge of cleaning the school. She was the mother of several children and was finding it difficult to make both ends meet. Though she had the fortune of having a good and God-fearing husband, he was rather sickly. Sr. Rina would help them in every possible way. The children were assiduous and most regular in attending the oratory. So, they were entitled to the first prizes in the various groups to which they belonged. Sr. Rina would watch with complacency when these children were selected for prizes. When they were shown the articles that they would select, they scarcely believed that such luck was theirs, for Sr. Rina used to provide attractive and useful articles as prizes. Once at a concert, the girls were prepared for a dance and the main part was played by the eldest daughter of this woman. When the girl entered the stage dressed so gracefully a soft cry of joy escaped from her mother who was present in the hall. I was near Sr. Rina and I saw her weep for joy on witnessing the happiness of that poor mother."

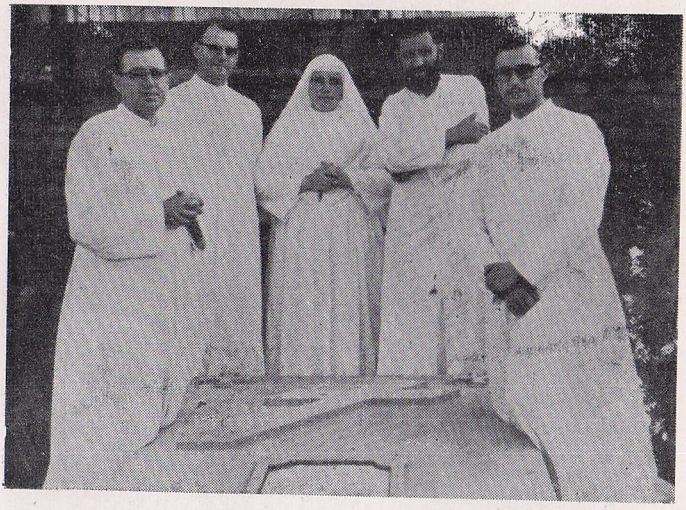
For those who suffer

"Sr. Rina was like an angel of solace and comfort to all those who suffered. That very woman while giving birth to another child succumbed to death. When Sr. Rina came to know this, her eyes filled with tears. She sent for the children, kept them in the convent and looked after them like a mother for quite some time. She also came to the rescue of that poor family by providing the coffin. At the funeral, she arranged that a good number of oratorians should take part. The novices were present for the funeral procession, thus

proving her delicate attention and love for this poor family. Even when everything was over, Sr. Rina did not abandon them but she went on providing food and clothes for all of them, since the poor father was not in a position to look after these children. Sr. Rina found places for them in several boardings so that they could continue their studies.

"The story continues. As soon as the eldest girl was able to teach, Sr. Rina took her in as a primary school teacher giving her all the assistance nesessary to help her father, and bring up her brothers and sisters. That girl is today the wife of an advocate and the mother of five children. One day, while returning from school, just in front of the lane which connects the convent to the main road, the third child of this family met with a serious accident. As she crossed the road, a truck ran over her. She was picked up in a pool of blood and one side of hers was skinned out. Sr. Rina rushed to the spot and brought her to the hospital. No one could ever refuse anything to Sr. Rina. The child was attended to carefully and after a month or so, she was discharged from the hospital perfectly healed."

Mother Mania and Sr. Magdalene Caspani, speak of the following incident. Sr. Rina came to know of a seriously ill person who needed transfusion of blood to survive. None of her relations was ready to offer the blood because of some superstitious beliefs. Sr. Rina placed the matter before the community and asked for their generous contributions. Those having the required blood-group offered their blood and the woman was saved. The one who was most struck by this act was the woman's husband, who asked for instruction and embraced the Catholic faith. The Community agreed to name him Philip after Fr. Rinaldi whose help was often invoked.



Sr. Rina at the tomb of Fr. Ferruccio



The children, Sr. Rina's best friends



Sr. Rina before leaving Dibrugarh



Sr. Rina with her sodalists

Quite close to the convent, there lived a poor family of five members, father, mother and three children. The mother was rather lazy and irresponsible, whereas the father was a good-natured and hard-working man, who by his daily labour earned the livelihood for the family. If he failed to work one day, the family would have to starve. One afternoon, while engaged in the construction of the road, the man collapsed and died. The news of the poor man's sudden death soon came to the ears of Sr. Rina. At once she rushed to the family which was still in the grip of that terrible shock. After rendering all possible assistance for the burial of that good practising catholic, Sr. Rina added that family to the long list of her beneficiaries and provided for every need.

Nobody excluded

In connection with Sr. Rina's love for the poor Mrs. Anna Maria Syngkrem has this to say: "Sr. Rina was very humble and good-natured. She loved everyone no matter what their social condition was or the religion they belonged to. She had a very special love for the poor, the orphans and the ignorant. She had the gift of understanding the problems of people. I myself used to approach her with my heart full of sorrow and I used to return from her full of joy and consolation, because she was so loving and understanding. Because of her, I was employed for many years as a teacher in the Khasi school of Nongthymmai.

"Once when Sr. Rina was in Robert's Hospital, I went to visit her. With the filial confidence that I always felt towards her, I opened my heart to her: 'Sister, you have always been a real mother to me, and so I want to tell you a longing desire of my heart. I feel God wants me to be a nurse. I like to look after the sick and assist them.' From her sick bed she

told me to get the forms, which she herself filled in. Before I left, she took me to her side and said: 'Anna, my child, I think this profession is better for you than teaching, so go ahead, you will be able to do much good through it'. She then introduced me to Sr. Teresa Villa who took care of me and still cares for me".

The old carpenter of Auxilium—Nongthymmai, had two children, a boy and a girl. The girl was lame from birth, she was then four years old when Mother Mania and Sr. Rina studied the case. Being still small something could be done. Marylyn was sent to the hospital for treatment. Now she is a fine healthy woman, the mother of two children.

Let us listen to what Mother Mania says about Sr. Rina's way of doing good. With the material activities of the construction Sr. Rina exercised also apostolic and missionary activities. "It may be said that she was a born missionary. She could approach any one, could speak to anyone, everyone was the child of our common Father to her. She felt and counted herself their mother, their sister. The poor, the orphans, the destitute, in every situation and need found a place of predilection in her heart. Sr. Rina could never see anyone suffer, she felt it her duty, to do what was in her power, to console, to help, to alleviate their suffering. She did all this with the greatest simplicity: never was seen in her a studied attitude".

For those in authority

Because of her position and works Sr. Rina had to meet many people. Mother Mania states that nobody could refuse her anything: her charming and simple ways attracted and won the heart of everybody. She made use of this gift for the

good of the persons she met. In Shillong, where she lived for a great part of her life, as well as in other places where she was, many government officials as well as people of other religions and social status knew Sr. Rina or had something to do with her. While she visited them on business, they on their turn would often reciprocate the visit. The poor would go to her for their material needs and for words of comfort. Richer people would need her for solutions to their difficult problems, which she would solve with God-inspired counsels.

Among her friends we may mention Mrs. Shullai, the inspectress of schools in Shillong. She kept Sr. Rina in high esteem and she would be ready to help her in all circumstances with approvals and grants for the schools. She appreciated the school's high standards of education and discipline. The head assistant of the inspector of schools, up to this day keeps a photo of Sr. Rina under the glass of his table. He was happy to receive it as a souvenir from one of the Sisters, adding: "I am going to treasure it, because I owe so much to Sr. Rina." It is good to recall that both the above-mentioned persons were Protestants. For those who know how tense the relation between Catholics and Protestants in that part of the country was and is even now, friendly relationship amounted to heroism.

For our separated brothers

Near Nongthymmai convent there still lives a Presbytarian family. Miss Paya, a member of that family, who used to attend music classes at the convent during Sr. Rina's time, remembers: "My memories of Sr. Rina go back to sixteen years ago. Recollecting those years and being reminded by other members of my family, whom Sr. Rina visited often, I see her now as a motherly, kind and cheerful person very much

interested in the lives of those entrusted to her. She was Superior when my younger brother was admitted in the school: we know her even better through him, I remember too that, to our great amazement she never thought it below her dignity to give a helping hand to anybody who needed it, even to the extent of carrying heavy bags of cement to assist workers."

Another Protestant gentleman says: "I came to know Sr. Rina from the time I admitted my son in her school. She used to visit our home frequently, she was a family friend. What a marvellous person she was! What a generous heart she had ! Her motherly ways made my son long for school just to meet her. We too looked forward to her visits to our home: she was very interested in us. I tell you frankly that I have never met a person, who can be compared to her in goodness and kindness.

Regarding Sr. Rina's relationship to people, Kong Trudis writes: "In those days when Sr. Rina was Superior at Nongthymmai, people used to come to the convent frequently: they used to consider the convent as their home and Sr. Rina their mother. Nobody dared to hide anything from her, because people felt that she knew everything about them. I too felt the same. I used to tell her whatever I had in my heart. I can tell, I never kept any secret from her, be it happy or sad, pleasant or unpleasant. Even my relation with my husband began with her consent and went on under her motherly guidance. It was because of the great love that she showed to people that they desired to come to her, to send their children to the oratory, even though they belonged to different social groups and religions."

For religious and priests

We have to mention still other persons she loved and revered: the religious and priests. Among them the Salesians were dearest to her heart. It is easy to find reasons for this special respect and affection. In this, she closely imitated her great model and mother, St. Mary Mazzarello, who affectionately and respectfully considered Don Bosco as her father and the Salesians as her brothers. Sr. Rina prayed for them continually, she helped them and cared for them in all the ways she could. She would take their suggestions as God-sent messages and in her turn admonish and encourage them whenever needed.

Her tender heart's dispositions may be shown by a revealing little episode that happended to her brother, Fr. Dino. It was during World War II when Dino was a novice and war restrictions in Northern Italy made everybody go hungry. On a walk day, he and some of his companions jumped into a cabbage field and up-rooted the cabbage stumps, which they ate. That was too much for the good assistant, who scolded them severely for it. The episode came to the ears of Sr. Rina, who at the first opportunity admonished the culprits with words of prudence and..restraint. But she also went to the superiors to speak of the case...and interceded for the novices. Was this sisterly concern that encouraged Brothers and also Priests to come to her houses, sometimes just for an outing, or a little chat, or an encouraging word? Anyhow the convent parlour was open and welcoming for everybody.

Bishop Stephen Ferrando was the first to experience Sr. Rina's concern. What he praised in her most was her loving tact and her zeal for souls. "I have never been refused anything by her." He said and added, "It seemed that every-

thing was possible to her when the glory of God and the good of souls was at stake." The same Bishop Ferrando on meeting any of Sr. Rina's missionary brothers would say: "Well, well, you are great indeed, but your Sr. Rina surpasses the three of you put together". No wonder that the oration at Sr. Rina's funeral was never ending: he had to say so much about her !

It was a common opinion among the priests that none of them who had approached Sr. Rina had come away from her disappointed. A month or so before the Eucharistic or Marian processions in Shillong, the Fathers would be at the convent to ask Sr. Rina's help and cooperation for the success of the procession. They were sure to get what they wanted. And so it was for similar parochial events. On one occasion, Fr. G. Guidotto, then parish priest of Mawlai, had gone to request Sr. Rina to go to a village to conclude an inportant meeting with the people, since he could not go due to his illness. Sr. Rina accepted at once, because it pained her that Christians should go disappointed. When she herself could not go, she instructed two of her Sisters to go and to say what she would have told the people on that occasion.

When Fr. R. Toneguzzo was in agony because of an injury in his backbone and had to be shifted immediately to Gauhati airport in an immovable position, Sr. Rina was there with her driver and van to carry him to the airport. Similarly when Fr. C. Bili collapsed during a prayer meeting in the house of a Catholic because of cerebral injury, people came running to Sr. Rina, who immediately rushed to the spot, to give all possible assistance and then carry him by van to the Bishop's house. Whenever out in town, if she happened to meet any priest walking she would stop her van and invite him in and bring him to his desired destination.

Little delicacies

Once in Mawlai when the Sisters were at tea, Sr. Rina brought a slab of 'torrone' (an Italian delicacy) to distribute among them. Just then Fr. Marchesi, the Rector of the Mawlai Theological College rang the bell. Immediately Sr. Rina took a piece of 'torrone' and ran to the parlour saying: "I am sure Father will enjoy it". In her spontaneity she found it natural to share anything with her Brothers in joy as also in sorrow, as the following example reveals. When Bro. Fabian got drowned in an attempt to save another Brother who had fallen in the river, Sr. Rina announced the news to the community with such sorrow that it appeared as if her own brother had drowned. She wanted the community to feel the sorrow and to share in the pain of the bereaved family, while offering abundant suffrages for the deceased Brother.

Her concern for others grew to deeper dimensions when the religious or priestly call was its object. Several Salesians testify to the fact that they owe very much to Sr. Rina as regards their vocation and progress in it. Bro. Francis Caleb Surin may be quoted as an example to this. He writes: "I met Sr. Rina for the first time in Tangla where I was with her brother, Fr. Guido. When she came to know that I had a mind to become a Salesian, she kept on encouraging me in my vocation. She would write to me when I was in Don Bosco, Liluah, for my technical training from 1951 to 1956. During my novitiate in 1957 she made me understand by letter the beauty of my Salesian vocation. On my profession day I received from her a picture drawn by her, in which the three vows were beautifully symbolized. From then onwards, up to her death, I would receive from her a card at Christmas and on the anniversary of my profession. I received the last letter from her a few months before she died. I still recollect the main points in it: 'I think we could make

an agreement: If I were to die earlier than you, I promise I shall continue to pray for you from heaven. But if you were to die before, please do continue to pray for me'. She did die first and I feel she is keeping her promise and continues to pray for me. I think that if today I am a Salesian and continue to be so, it is due to Sr. Rina's prayers."

Others speak of her goodness

No wonder then that everybody would be impressed by her virtue and sanctity. Fr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh, Professor of Scripture at the Mawlai Theological College, will never speak to the Junior Sisters without mentioning some virtue or other of Sr. Rina, whom he considers a saint. Bishop O. Marengo, the great missionary Bishop of North-East India, to the one who proposed to write the biography of Sr. Rina, said: "Yes, do write about her. The narration of her virtues will do a great deal of good to those who read about her." Fr. Kenny, who was chaplain to the Auxilium Convent, at the time of Sr. Rina, says: "So much can be said of her: she excelled in the love of God and souls. Often I saw her weeping at the thought of people who would not correspond with God's graces."

We may well conclude this chapter with the authoritative statements of two of her superiors. Mother Teresa Merlo writes: "Sr. Rina was always generous towards everyone, her Superiors and Sisters and towards the Salesian missionaries, all of whom she considered her brothers." Mother Mania adds: "Persons of every sector and kind, priests, brothers, sisters, youth—all can say 'thank you' to Sr. Rina for having received one favour or another in some difficult situation in life. Every kind of people without exception gained from Sr. Rina's charity."

12. "Da mihi animas"

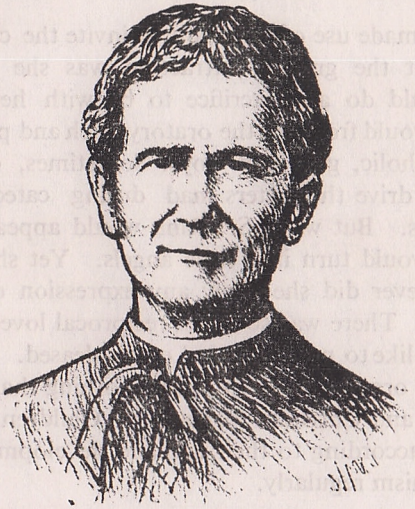
The virtue which Sr. Rina admired most in St. John Bosco, her founder, was his zeal for souls. She tried to imitate him with that simplicity and dedication which she had found in St. Mary Mazzarello, her mother and model. But in her vocation she was even more fortun te than both, since she could be in fact, what her founders could be only in dreams and desire, a missionary. It was this dimension of her Salesian vocation that made her ever enthusiastic and grateful to God and, we may add, that it was the missionary dimension that made her opt for being a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. It has been affirmed by many, especially by her superiors, both ecclesiastical and religious, that her chief characteristic was her love for souls. Nothing could have stopped her when the good of souls was at stake. It will be inspiring to follow her in her activities.

Sr. Rina and the oratory.

As we have already seen, Sr. Rina as a girl had tried to satisfy her love for souls in the simpler ways, which the religious atmosphere of her Christian home and native town would allow. What she had learnt from her teachers and Sisters in school and at the Catechism classes or in the meetings of the sodality or Catholic Action groups and later on from the reading of pious books and edifying lives of Saints, was her main tool for doing apostolate among the smaller children and her companions. It was natural for her to be a religious leader: this appeared already when she was a teenager. How many of her companions of those years found her behaviour inspiring !

As a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians she was so happy to realize that the primary means by which Don Bosco actualized his motto "Da mihi animas" was by running fruitful oratories and youth centres for the young. From the very first years of her religious life we see her giving her very best to this activity: her prayers and sacrifice, her natural qualities and inviting acceptance, her initiatives and entertainments. She very well knew that the principal aim of the oratory was the human and Christian formation of the young, which is imparted through the catechetical instruction and enlivened by the reception of the sacraments and participation in the liturgical activities. To achieve this she made use of all the means suggested by Don Bosco: loving kindness and understanding, personal talks, the simple touching 'Good Nights', the little word in the ear, and all the other little ways so common in a Salesian contex.

She always kept these principles and ways alive in her heart. But when as superior she was in a position to give of her best for this most important Salesian activity, she made sure that the oratory became what it should be according to the heart of Don Bosco, the main field of Salesian apostolate. For this she encouraged the children to frequent the oratory or youth centres in great numbers; she conducted sports, arranged beautiful entertainments, staged plays and dramas;



projected the lives of saints and other instructive and interesting stories by means of film-strips, slides and films; provided for possibility of many lively and healthy games, according to the choice of the children; organized pilgrimages, outings and picnics; made use of parties and gatherings to have the children together in useful and edifying amusements.

Many events of the oratory life were concluded with a prize distribution. The prizes were very often real surprises for the children, especially those more regular in their attendance. She believed in doing things well and even in giving prizes she preferred that the children should find them useful. The donated articles were set aside for prizes at Christmas. She bought new items: she considered money well spent, when it was to buy things for the oratory or for rewarding children who came to it. She herself would visit or send the Sisters to visit the houses of the children to invite the parents to send their children to the oratory.

Sr. Rina made use of all means to invite the children to the oratory. But the greatest attraction was she herself. The children would do any sacrifice to be with her. All kinds of children would frequent the oratory: rich and poor, Catholic and non-Catholic, girls and boys. Sometimes, especially the boys, would drive the Sisters mad during catechism classes and at games. But when Sr. Rina would appear in front of them, they would turn into little angels. Yet she never scolded them, never did she show any expression of annoyance or irritation. There was so much reciprocal love that children would never like to make her sad or displeased. Sr. Rina saw to it that the oratory children lacked nothing that would serve their human and Christian formation. Children were divided into groups according to their age and development and were taught catechism regularly.

On Saturday evenings children were prepared for Reconciliation and then helped to make it. On Sundays the chapel of the convent and school would be at the disposal of the children and the adults that would come to the Eucharistic Celebration, since they could not go to the parish church that was too far for them. In the afternoons of Sunday there would be the recitation of the Rosary after the catechism

classes. A talk by the priest would preceed the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, which would conclude the Sunday oratory. Apart from these Sunday religious practices, the oratory children were reminded and encouraged to participate in Holy Mass on First Fridays, First Saturdays and the 24th of each month in honour of Our Lady Help of Christians. The month of May and the month of the Holy Rosary in October, the novena of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the Christmas Novena were conducted with due solemnity and children would take part in them in great numbers and with great fervour.

Oratorians remember

Sr. Rina's unequalled success in her oratory apostolate is extalled by two of her oratorians. Mrs. Trudis writes: "Sr. Rina's great love for the people and the children resulted in large numbers of them flocking to the oratory. We would number 350 to 400. There was no distinctions among us: Khasis, Napalis and others would have full access to the oratory. Sometimes even our parents would come with us. When sports and games were conducted during Christmas they too would take part in them. Prizes were distributed to participants and all of us were eager to get them. We treasured them very much both for their material and affective meaning.

"Every year either after Christmas or Easter all oratorians were taken for a picnic. Sr. Rina used to teach us beautiful dramas, which were thoroughly enjoyed by everybody, especially Bishop Ferrando and the Fathers who would be invited. Sometimes they were so much taken up with the performance and the themes of the plays that they would invite us to stage the same dramas at their parishes or at the Cathedral Hall. How wonderful were those dramas, which would convey such sound and appealing lessons! I remember

also that on Saturdays Sr. Rina would send me and my friend Isidora to invite children for the Sacrament of Reconcilliation. So many were the children that would come for this Sacrament that the van had to be sent to call other Fathers to come to hear confession. On Sundays all these children would be present for Holy Mass.

"Sr. Rina had a marvellous power to draw children and people to the practice of Christian life and duties. In spite of all her taxing works, she would find time to meet people after Mass and talk to each one to them about their needs and problems, their joys and achievements. Often she would distribute small religious articles, such as pictures and medals. Though not much in themselves, we appreciated these gifts because they were given by her with great love and concern and with timely advice and encouragement."

On the same topic Mrs. Ritali adds: "In the oratory Sr. Rina with the help of the other Sisters would create such enthusiasm and high spirits that we would not dream of ever missing it. Sr. Rina never left us alone. She would speak such sweet, soothing and touching words that would keep us away from evil and help us to become good. She would encourage us to love Jesus and Our Blessed Mother. Once I heard her saying: 'A medal of Our Lady is more precious than any amount of gold and silver in this world'."

Greater witness

In her memories about Sr. Rina, Mother Mania could not forget Sr. Rina's preferential love for the Oratory: "Sr. Rina's most preferred field of apostolate was the Oratory. She was a true daughter of Don Bosco in this matter. All were made to feel interested in the oratory: parents and children. She had special place in her heart for everyone and a

timely word on her lips, which helped them immensely. She knew very well how to organize feast, gatherings and the distribution of prizes... and then you should see her during the games! Oh, she was the soul of the recreations.

"At Nongthymmai the Oratory was also for boys. They played as they could but they believed they played foot ball very well. They needed the largest play-ground all to themselves. Even the sea-saws and swings intended for little ones had to be shifted elsewhere. Sr. Rina would announce a match a week ahead, and arrange that the girls and small boys would have a convenient accommodation at the sides to watch and enjoy the match. She would sit among the bigger girls, and shout out encouraging words to keep up enthusiasm. In no time all would shout and make enough noise to make the young players believe they were sports champions!"

Sr. Rina and the school.

According to Don Bosco's system of education the school is one of the most effective means of youth formation: it is in the school situation that the young are—should be !— prepared for the future life they are going to lead in the family and in society . Sr. Rina was fully aware of it. That is the reason, which made her help in the construction of school buildings, but above all she was inspired to prepare wonderful educative communities in which the children would feel happy and would be prepared to take their own responsibility in life.

The teaching staff

Both by her example and advice she would ask the cooperation of her community of Sisters in the work of the school. She always felt happy about the contribution and the responsible participation of her Sisters in the different activities

they conducted for the welfare of the children. Sr. Rina followed the teachers very carefully. She wanted that they prepare their lessons in time and that they deliver them to the best of their capability with clarity, correctness and conviction. Though she was ever so motherly and understanding with everybody, she was exacting when teaching was concerned. At the same time she had great esteem for the teachers, whom she considered as the closest collaborators in the work of education. She nourished close relations with them and she helped them in whatever way possible. Many still remember her with deep affection and joy.

The pupils

Her relation with the pupils was most cordial, we could say, even motherly. All the children loved her dearly. We could now quote what so many of them have to say about her, we limit ourselves to a few of them only. Miss Maria G. Lamare writes: "Whenever I think of Sr. Rina, I see her standing in front of the school with her arms outstretched and a wonderful smile on her face. It was this way I saw her for the first time twenty-two years ago, when, as a toddler I first went to school. It was February 1958 and I was going with my mother and my younger sister. The thought of facing life without my mother almost crushed me. However God in his goodness gave me another mother in Sr. Rina. As soon as I entered the school, there she was with outstretched arms and before I could realize it, I found myself within that cosy nest: fears disappeared as fog before the rising sun. Throughout those years when she was with us, she bestowed on us all such love and care that we never felt the need of mother's presence: Sister lovingly took mother's place. I firmly believe that it is Sr. Rina's love that made me the stable person that I am at present. My love for Auxilium School is the result of

the happy days when I was a pupil of that school. I deem myself fortunate for having been under the care of Sr. Rina."

Miss Mary Lamare, younger sister of Miss Maria adds: "Since I was very young when I first met Sr. Rina, it is difficult to remember those first impressions. I even forget who was our class teacher in those days. But one thing I remember is that Sr. Rina would come daily to see us and would spend some time playing with us. She could not bear seeing any of us crying. She would take us up and so speak or act that we would forget our little sorrows. I remember too the beautiful picnics, she would take us to. She would be with us all along. She really was a true Salesian Sister radiating love, and the joy of living."

Mrs. Trudis, another pupil of hers, recalls: "Every morning Sr. Rina would come to take the assembly and would give us such pleasant and precious pieces of advice, which we treasured jealously and applied diligently. When the assembly was over she used to go to every class and often she would meet the very poor children who did not have books, rubber or other things. She would take them to the office and supply them with what they needed. She would never send them home because they did not have such necessary things. If some children failed to reach up to the standard of the class, she would excuse them saying: "May be they did not have enough to eat, or time to study at home, or perhaps they lacked a table on which to write their home-work. Perhaps they did not even have kerosene to light their lamps to study."

Sr. Rina would never scold or humiliate the pupils. If some of them failed to be what they were expected to, she would find out other causes for their failure. Often she would blame the teacher for it, saying that perhaps their lessons were not

so clear or interesting or that the pupils needed to have the same matter explained to them again and again. She would even give them hints on how to prepare their classes, how they should correct diligently their home-works and the way to get the attention of the children in class. If after admonitions she would see that due to the unpreparedness of the teacher the pupils lacked proper teaching, she would carefully see that teachers were replaced. However it must not be forgotten that the way she would correct the teachers was exactly and always her own way, that is, always with that gentleness, motherliness and understanding which took care of their limitations and also of their goodwill and efforts.

The parents

Sr. Rina's goodness and kindness went beyond the school premises, it went out to the parents of the children. She made sure that they were acquainted with what was going on in the school, especially regarding their own sons and daughters. She wanted them to share in the education of their own children as much as the Sisters and the teachers. She was in fact even interested in their own welfare, material and spiritual. She always had a word of praise and appreciation for them and tried to encourage their efforts in the up-bringing of their children. She considered them as first educators of their children and the best collaborators of the work that was done for them at the school. For this the parents would feel happy and pleased. The Parents' Day was prepared with special enthusiasm. Sr. Rina wanted to impress upon the children's minds the need to respect and obey their own parents and at the same time of showing gratitude for the work they were doing

This attitude of Sr. Rina besides ensuring a wonderful success in the school, had also the effect of forming with the parents and children an educative community together with the Sisters and teachers. The parents would feel really grateful for what the school was doing for their children, and at the same time they would consider themselves most happy in having Sr. Rina as their personal friend. When they would come to the school they would not go away without having approached her and have had a good word of encouragement from her. In Shillong—Nongthymmai, where practically there were two schools in the same compound, the Khasi and English medium school, Sr. Rina wanted that the same attention should be given to both. She visited both the schools every day . The Parents' Day or other school features would be celebrated in both sections with the same solemnity on different days . She felt that she had to be present at both fully and in this way see for herself the progress of the children in a better way and also add to their joy and success.

The most important aim of the school was not just in success, examination, not even faultless discipline, but the total growth of the persons through the spiritual and friendly atmosphere that pervaded all with joy and contentment. Sr. Rina made the school the vehicle of good education, but especially of moral and spiritual values. Catechism and moral classes were given the first place and the best teachers. She herself would take these classes almost as a regular teacher. It would be interesting to quote from her pupils about this dimension of her interest. We shall speak of one event in the school and in the oratories that can illustrate the main concern of Sr. Rina in the education of the young: helping them to meet Christ in a very personal way.

Sr. Rina knew, also through her very personal experience the tremendous impact that Holy Communion, especially the first Holy Communion, has on the life of every Christian. So she took very great interest in preparing children for their First Encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist. If she was unable to conduct the catechism classes herself, she would entrust them to competent Sisters. Frequently, almost daily, when possible, she would drop into these classes, to have an idea about these children and how they were being prepared for this



great Sacrament. Several times she would contribute her share of preparation for the same. When the day of the First Holy Communion would draw near, she would see even to the external needs of the children, such as getting ready the frocks and the veils of the children, so as to make that day a very memorable one. Needless to say there would be the family

gathering after the Mass, at which the chidren and their parents would get together to share a friendly party. She in fact insisted that the parents come together with their children to the sacred table as they would have to shoulder the responsibility of bringing them up as good Christians. On seeing these beautiful manifestations of faith Sr. Francesca Martina, then Novice Mistress, would exclaim: "How much would her heart overflow with joy at seeing the First Communicants at the Altar Rails, both in dress and in demeanour appearing like little angels !" It will be worthwhile to note here that First Communion was not considered by Sr. Rina as the end of her catechesis for the little children, rather she insisted that catechesis had to continue especially for these little children, so that they would be able to deepen the meaning of their meeting with the Lord. So she would continue helping them in understanding better and frequenting more meaningfully the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion, which, as a true daughter of St. John Bosco, she considered as the greatest supports for a good Christian life.

Sr. Rina and associations

Sr. Rina had an inborn attraction for pious associations: perhaps we may ascribe this to her very friendly character. She longed to be with people, the friend of everybody. Already as a girl she loved to belong to the Marian Associations and to the Catholic Action Groups in her native town. She developed her love for associations, especially those of a religious nature, as she grew older. In this she definitely imitated Mother Mazzarello, who greaved her religious and apostolic life through the Association of the Immaculate Mother. What Sr. Rina appreciated as for herself, she also thought it as a most effective means of apostolate among the young she was entrusted with. The young love to group together, and if their grouping spirit is properly

channelled they can really get the best fruits of the associations they wish to belong to.

Sr. Rina was fully aware of the efficacy of these pious associations in the formation of youth. So she took pains to promote them. In due time she would select the girls according to their requests and age, introduce them to the meaning of the divers groups and fully enrol them accordingly on certain feast days. So on 2nd October, the small children would be enrolled in the association of the Little Angels, on 14th May in 'the Garden of Mary' and on 24th May as Children of Mary. As she took interest in providing for the external things of these associations, such as frocks and ribbons, she was even more careful that the girls be adorned with the virtues of their heavenly protectors. But what was even more important for her was the desire that these groups help the children to become truly apostolic, that they strive to reach out to their companions and friends in actions of zeal. One of the best fruits of these associations was that they nurtured religious vocations: Sr. Christina Kharkongor FMA attributes her vocation to Sr. Rina's care through the oratory and the associations. Piety and religious fervour were clearly the most evident fruits of these Sodalities and religious groups.

All together for the common good

To keep up the enthusiasm and the joy of the children in all their activities as oratorians, sodalists and pupils of her schools, Sr. Rina made use of little parties, picnics and family gatherings, that would help to keep children and parents united to the Sisters and the staff of the institutions. Up to this day the old pupils remember those happy days and bless the motherly care of Sr. Rina.

One of the features that brought great fruits of piety and joy in the children of the associations, oratory and school during Sr. Rina's time, was the annual Spiritual Retreat for the older girls. This is now a very common feature, present in all Salesian schools and oratories and especially in boarding schools. But the praise of starting it goes to Sr. Rina, who on the advice of the then parish priest, Rev. Fr. Foglia, had requested that such spiritual practice should be tried also for the day-students and the oratory girls. Sr. Rina jumped at the idea and made everything available for that: her community of Sisters, the buildings, and even a free kitchen.

Sr. Rina and Parish apostolate

Sr. Rina found family visiting another powerful outlet to her apostolic zeal. She considered it as one of the most efficacious means to keep families together, to inspire Catholics to live up to their Christian duties, and a possibility of opening to evangelization. There would not be a single family in the vicinity of the convents in which Sr. Rina lived, which had not been visited by her and had not received from her guidance and encouragement in their faith and even in moral or material difficulties.

Kong Trudis, one of her constant companions in home visiting says: "Sr. Rina used to enter every family unmindful of their caste or religion. People used to receive us with exceptional enthusiasm, joy and gratitude. Sr. Rina used to sit on anything that was offered her, sometimes even at the cost of some personal suffering and inconvenience. She would not show any sign of uneasiness in order not to pain the hosts, who would not have anything else to offer her. Rather, she appeared to be the happiest person in the company. On such visits people used to pour out their hearts to her telling

her all their difficulties and joys. Sr. Rina patiently listened to them and then suggested some solution to their problems or give some useful advice and conclude with a prayer to Our Lady asking for her protection on the family we were visiting."

Total well-being

Sr. Rina's solicitude for such families or persons did not end with that visiting or with just good words. She sought out practical ways to solve their 'problems, to direct them to some job, to give them some spiritual or material aid, as far as it lay in her power. In this house-visiting she would personally see whether people were in need of food, clothes, books for the students, medicines for the sick. Above all Sr. Rina would look after the needs of their souls. She brought back lapsed Catholics to the practice of religion, she reunited broken families and she helped non-Catholics to embrace the faith. People felt so much at home in her presence and had such unlimited trust in her solicitude and care, that they would dare to trouble her for all their needs. At times they would go to call her up at night in moments of personal or family emergency.

The fruits that followed from Sr. Rina's apostolic endeavour were numerous indeed ! Every year she had a good number of people, young and old in her school, oratories or in her neighbourhood, ready to embrace the Catholic faith. Several of these would be baptized in the convent chapel, others would join the bigger groups in the parish church at Christmas or Easter or in other public feasts of the Church. All Sr. Rina's activities were directed to this goal, as Bishop Ferrando said: "To bring souls to Christ."

Mission Sunday, for instance, was celebrated with special enthusiasm and zeal. From Mission Sunday onwards a systematic family visitation would begin: the Sisters were asked to go in groups to the various houses around the convent. This was a help to the families, but at the same time it was a means of training the younger Sisters in apostolic experiences. By seeing for themselves the needs of the people, understanding their problems and helping them through their prayers and good advice to become better people and good Christians, they would come to love such activities. Sr. Rina would either go with this or that pair of Sisters or would sum up their experiences with salutary advice or encouragement on their return to the convent. One of the Sisters has this to say: "In contact with such true missionary, we too felt the urge of the missionary zeal !"



13. In the Spirit

The secret of Sr. Rina's astounding success in life is to be found in her simple and solid peity: that gift of the Holy Spirit which disposes man to love God as a Father and to serve him because we love him. It was this piety which Christ lived and taught: the piety of the 'Our Father'.

If Sr. Rina was always serene and happy, 'a soul for ever in festal mood' ('Un'anima sempre in festa', as Mother Mania beautifully defined her): if she was always so ardent and zealous, so active and hard-working, so forgetful of self and thoughtful of others; if she never shirked sacrifices and hardships, it is because of her unaffected loving piety. Like St. Francis de Sales, she loved God with every fibre of her heart. On her death-bed tranquilly and sincerely she declared: "I am happy to die because I have done everything for the Lord."

In tune with God

Piety is nourished by prayer, by practices that lift our minds and hearts to God and by our constant communion with him. Actually all our activity done in his presence with the ntention of fulfilling his will is piety. So too in a particular way, our life and our acts of charity in the pursuit of our vocation (God's plan for us) is piety. Just think of the communion that is built among brothers and sisters (the Christian and the religious community). According to the words of Jesus: "Wherever two or more people are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst", by our being present to each other and through us to others we live the reality of the family of God where he is the Father. In other words when we live the 'spirit' of piety, we live a life of prayer.

Sr. Rina was a soul in prayer. Sr. Marykutty of the Sacred Heart, who lived with Sr. Rina for several years declared: "Her constant peaceful attitude was the outcome of an uninterrupted union with God. I can unhesitatingly testify that Sr. Rina was never found in a fit of temper. She was always calm, always self-possessed. Throughout the day she made use of mental, and vocal prayer. On her journeys she was always found with her Rosary in hand while lips were always moving in prayer. She nourished her piety with constant ejaculatory prayers."

She was most punctual, regular and diligent in the community practices of piety, knowing very well that they are the means for providing oil to keep fervour glowing. Apart from certain occasions when charity demanded it she, never absented herself from prayer and its communitarian manifestations in moments of religious services. It will be edifying to watch her now throughout the daily expressions of prayer.

Her 'Thanks be to God' would open her busy day with an intimate short colloquy with God, by which she would offer herself and all in her care in union with Jesus to the Father. Her union with God would continue at a more personal and deeper level during morning meditation. Nothing was more desired by her than this morning tuning up into motivating herself for what she was going to be and to do during the day. Sr. Rina was a passionate reader, spiritual books were her first and best choice. From these she would draw plenty of sound inspiring matter for her meditation and for counselling. She would reflect on what had impressed her in reading such books or listening to talks and sermons. It was clear that when she would talk or preach she was expressing her personal reflection after she had meditated upon certain truths. It was evident. also that most of the short personal thoughts she would suggest to Sisters and young people alike were drawn from Don Bosco's sayings as found in Biographical Memoirs, or phrases she would remember from the Biography of Mother Mazzarello.

The Eucharist at the centre

The Holy Eucharist was definitely the centre of Sr. Rina's life and activity. She much appreciated its sacrificial aspect: Holy Mass meant a great deal to her especially at the end of her life. She would offer herself to Jesus as a victim in expiation for her own sins, which she always found too many and too great, and for the sins of mankind. Invariably at Mass she would pray for everybody, but especially for those in her care, the people who yet did not know Jesus and even for those who would not appreciate the full meaning of redemption.

She would speak often and convincingly of the greatness of Holy Mass to everybody showing them how much she esteemed it and how much she wished that others should

benefit by it. The following conversation narrated by her sister Gemma reveals the truth of the above statement.

"When she came home for the last time, she visited us and as usual she was very concerned about each one of us. After the informations about each of us in the family, she addressed me.

—Well, you are now preparing Auxilia for First Holy Communion. How is she doing ?

—As any other child of that age.

—Does she understand whom she is receiving ? I mean, this is the most important step in her life: Jesus wants to take full possession of her...

—Now, do you mean that she can understand all that ?.. ...

—Where is she ? I must talk to her...I think I should help you in this.

—I'll be happy. Just stay with us today. You will get her when she comes home from the church.

—And what about Fiorenzo ? Is he still going to serve at the altar ?

—Well, he is becoming tall now and he feels it...

—No, no. Insist that he continue. Now is the time he needs Jesus most. I'll encourage him also to go ahead, to be an altar-boy near Jesus...

—And what about the others ?

—The two elder sons, not bad, if you consider the trend in this town.

—What do you mean ? I do not think our children should just follow the trend, especially in matters like the Mass. The Sacraments have always been revered in our family. And Bruno...

—Well, I got him round. But he complains that there is no time for all this...and, well, you know.

—I'll speak to him...for a Catholic there is nothing greater

than the Mass. And what of you ? Are you still going daily to Mass ?

—Well, I try my best. But...

—Do you remember when we were small, mummy would take us daily for Mass. In winter it was cold and dark, and yet we would not miss it. As years go we have to grow also in the understanding of the mystery of Christ: his death and resurrection, which we live every day in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

The Sacrament of Love

Holy Communion was the great moment of her oneness with Christ. One of her Sisters, who watched her closely for many years testifies: "It was edifying to watch her at prayer. But there was a climax in her recollectlon and concentration: it was the time of Holy Communion. As soon as she would come to her place, she would bend her head and lock her face in her hands and remain in that position for all the time she was allowed by the common silence. At times she looked as if sorry for having to stop her colloquy with Jesus. At other times she would quietly take her handkerchief and wipe some stray tear, which she could not manage to hide from us."

One of the working girls, who used to accompany Sr. Rina to Calcutta, during her stay in Bandel, recalls: "I often accompanied Sr. Rina to Calcutta, where she would buy the material necessary for the construction of the new building. We would rise very early and sometimes we would not get a Priest from the church to give us Mass and Holy Communion. On such days, when we reached Calcutta, we would go to the cathedral and ask for Holy Communion. Once I had taken some food in the morning and so I could not receive Holy

Communion (then we were not allowed to eat anything before Communion). Sr. Rina indirectly made me understand what I should have done, she told me: 'When I cannot receive Jesus I feel that the day for me is meaningless. I know that without breakfast in the morning one feels giddy, but I think that Holy Communion is worth all the trouble we may experience in our effort to receive it."

The same girl remarked that Sr. Rina would see that all the working staff of the Convent and school had all facilities to attend to their religious duties properly and at the prescribed times; even time-tables were so arranged as to allow them to participate in the religious and liturgical services.

Intimacy with Christ

The fervour acquired during the Holy Mass and the intimacy with Jesus lived during Holy Communion would keep Sr. Rina always attuned to God's presence during the day. So she added the prescribed and voluntary Visits to the Blessed Sacrament as special moments of grace. She did remember the words of Don Bosco: "Do you want many favours from Jesus ? Then visit Him in the Blessed Sacrament many times. Like Mother Mazzarello Sr. Rina looking towards the chapel would say more with the heart than with the lips: "There rests our Love !" In fact it was noticed by many that often even during her manual work and especially when she moved from place to place in the house, she would look up to the chapel and in a very subdued tone would utter some prayer. We shall again have the opportunity of speaking of her personal prayer, which generally had the chapel and the tabernacle as its best setting.

It was this intimacy with the Lord that transformed her busy day into a perennial prayer-offering. She knew perfectly well that if this union with God was not fostered to a high level with prayer and practices of piety she would have had to succumb to her extraordinary activity, which was in fact involving all her being . The midday examination of conscience was a salutary check in her efforts to motivate spiritually all her thoughts, words and actions. Towards the end of her life she had been very careful to destroy all her spiritual diaries and other spiritual 'accounts' of her 'journey to sanctity', as she had titled her spiritual notes. Those who knew about their existence feel sorry to have lost valuable insights not only of Sr. Rina's personal intimate approaches to committed holiness, but also precious manifestations of God's work in a soul completely devoted to the movements of the Holy Spirit.

Her continual ejaculatory prayers either practiced by herself or suggested to her Sister-companions during work or other occupations, were spontaneous. Even the often-repeated 'Viva Gesu` ! Viva Maria !' had the special purpose not only of uniting them to Jesus and Mary but also of uniting themselves to each other. 'Sr. Rina put so much tenderness in them, that those who heard her felt spurred to love God more', (Quotation from an F.M.A. Sister).

Listening to God

Spiritual Reading, she believed, was spiritual food and nourishment and as such she made use of it and gave others the opportunity to sit at this happy 'banquet'. The community Rosary was styled by her as a family reunion around Mother Mary, the mother of the family. She would not part with the rosary for all the gold in the world. But that recitation of the rosary was not the only one in the day. She loved this

simple and yet efficacious prayer so much that she would recite it several times a day. This happened especially during her many journeys and every time she moved from place to place. Miss Philomena David, one of the teachers of Bandel, adds: "Any time we went with her to a place, she would ask us to join her in prayer. We would like to join her because it was really so inspiring to pray together with her! She really prayed, she prayed much, she prayed everywhere."

The Night Prayer followed by the 'Good Night' was welcome by her as the last opportunity to offer herself to God together with her Sisters and the young people, for the night and for life. Both Sisters and children would look forward to her tender parting words for that day. Knowing of the far-reaching efficacy of this 'Good Night' wish, Sr. Rina made the greatest and best use of it. "I remember " says Sr. Mary Sorkar, "with what eagerness we were waiting for Sr. Rina's 'Good Night' talk. She would always recall some little event in our daily life or give some news from our Province or the Salesian world and then almost everyday she would conclude with some reference to the life of St. John Bosco or Mother Mazzarello or some great Salesian. Her main topics would be charity and family spirit, obedience, life of prayer, work done for God and the poor and self-denial. These were truths that would sink very deep into our hearts."

Childlike prayer

If a short digression is allowed, we may ask what are the special traits in Sr. Rina's piety, the fulfilment of its practices and personal prayer: after all she did just what every good religious would do in the matter. The peculiarity in Sr. Rina's piety is exactly her simplicity and spontaneity, which combined with an unusual diligence and constancy made piety

pleasing to herself and to others. As it happened with other virtues in her, so also and especially in her piety, Sisters and externs would notice something so attractive and convincing that they would like to imitate her.



While in prayer in the chapel she would kneel erect with both her hands joined over the pew and her eyes fixed on the

tabernacle or on the altar. She seldom sat in the chapeel xcept during common meditation, spiritual reading and the homily during the Mass. In those days during the whole Mass (except for the Gospel) and the Rosary it was the custom to kneel. More than an act of penance, Sr. Rina thought it an act of adoration to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament or an act of veneration to Our Lady. Even during prayers outside the chapel, Sr. Rina would infallibly join her hands and lower her head in recollection.

Sr. Rina considered piety as her first concern, the guiding principle of all her activity. It was in fact her relentless activity (because of which she could have been thought of as an action-oriented religious), that made her seek God ever more and in a deeper way. Even when she held simultaneously different and serious responsibilities, such as Superior of the vast Community at Nongthymmai, Provincial Economer and Secretary to the Provincial, if she were not in her office, she would surely be found in the chapel, at the altar-rail lit up by the tabernacle lamp, speaking to the Eucharistic Lord or just talking to the Blessed Mother of God. She intensified this practice of intimacy with Jesus towards the end of her life, especially when she became aware of the progressing gravity of her illness. But there were also other moments of greater faith and confidence with the Lord: the times of special spiritual needs for the community or for individual persons.

Prayer and...

"Once I had gone to Sr. Rina with a terrible personal problem," confidentially relates a now-established person. "It meant everything to me: my happiness was at stake and this would affect my future ! I spoke about it to Sr. Rina. She listened to me for quite a long time. Every now and

then she would just put in a little question. When at last I stopped speaking almost exhausted from talking and overcharged emotions, I ventured to ask for a solution from her. She kept quiet for a little while and lowered her head in thought and prayer. She then said: "I should feel how much it concerns and hurts you. I think there is a solution to it: because the good God does not want us to suffer, he loves us. But if you expect a solution from me, then I shall not be able to give it now. Would you come back next Sunday ? In the meantime both of us shall pray to Our Lady, we shall pray a lot, and...well, the rest leave it to me ! The good Father in Heaven will show us the way."

"I do not know what happened during those five intervening days. I did pray, but Sr. Rina must have prayed much more than me. I am afraid she must have done something else too. The fat is when Sunday came, my problem was there no more. In fact I did not even feel the need of going to Sr. Rina. It was she who called me and, as if we had been just talking about it up to then, she said: "Well, we have to be thankful to God and our Mother Mary. I had told you that She would solve your problem."

Liturgy

A special characteristic of Sr. Rina's deep and well-balanced piety was shown by the way she lived the liturgy and all the devotional aspects of Christian prayer. She herself observed with real liturgical spirit the special times of the Ecclesiastical year. Advent with the Christmas Novena aroused eagerness for the coming of the Lord. At Christmas the meaning of the incarnation (God-with-us) would infallibly move her to tears of holy joy. There was of course the happiness of the Christmas season, that grips everybody: but to Sr.

Rina it was always a personal rebirth (she was born on 24th December). It made her think seriously. It made her start anew every year !

The sacredness of Lent with its penitential spirit reminded Sr. Rina of conversion and renewal. In her tender years, the suffering Christ had a special appeal for her. Like Mother Mazzarello she loved the 'Crucified' Saviour and consequently all devotions that would lead her to show love to him. So the 'Way of the Cross', which was dear to her all the year round, would be a daily practice in Lent, Penance and 'sacrifices' during Lent would be more severe, but only perceived by the very few who knew her closely. During passion time the conversion of sinners and of the pagan world took a prominent place in her mind and heart.

Easter Joy would burst in her life and in the life of her communities as the powerful celebration of the Risen Lord: his victory and the victory of all Christians with Him ! She would stress this Easter joyfulness even in the arrangement of new items of external festivity and relaxation, such as the Easter picnic, the visit to other Communities, the cinema show or other entertainment, the walk to some special spot in town (the graveyard was never excluded: Jesus rose from the tomb !). All of which brought in a note of happiness in the life of the persons and the Community. It was Easter time !

Salesian piety

Sr. Rina's piety was difinitely Salesian. The Sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation together with the devotion to Mary, the Immaculate Help of Christians, were basically the pivots of her spirituality.

We have already described her devotion to the Eucharist. The Salesian dimension that characterized it, was her desire to speak about it and to impress those in her care about the all-pervading importance of the Eucharist. The Mass and Holy Communion were not 'devotions' but the culminating 'force' of Christian life.

Reconciliation was the concluding moment of a process of conversion and renewal. The weekly reception of this Sacrament was not just a means for forgiveness of sins. To Sr. Rina it always meant a return to the Father of mercies in an act of unlimited surrender to God's compassionate Heart and a spur to perfections. Hence a thorough examination of conscience, sincere sorrow and a strong resolution were practised and recommended by her to her charges as Don Bosco would have done for his Salesians and pupils. The Sisters were all struck by Sr. Rina's esteem for the Sacrament of reconciliation. She would be always the first to approach the Confessor for it, irrespective of the person. That was an encouragement for the community, which admired her spirit of faith, humility and sincerity. Although her confession was relatively short, she made use of it for spiritual direction as well: this is inferred from what she would say, when she encouraged the girls and the Sisters to 'keep' to the advice of the confessor, who should be made acquainted with the state of one's soul.'

Devotion to Mary

Mary, "the Mother of God and also our Mother," the Immaculate Help of Christians, has been for Sr. Rina more than a beautiful name: it has been a life commitment. It had blossomed in childhood and went on maturing with the years. Her filial prayer was an expression of it: there was nothing

that she would not be able to ask Our Lady, nothing that she would not receive from her both as spiritual graces and material aid.

But the greatest proof of Sr. Rina's love and devotion to Our Lady was her ardent and constant effort to imitate her virtues. At the beginning of the Novena to the Immaculate in the year 1959 in a "Good Night" she invited the community to make the Novena fruitfully by promising Our Lady to imitate her virtues. She said: "The best way to imitate our Lady is to love God as she did. Nobody loved God as much and in the way she did through her faith, humility and spotless purity. We will never be as Our Lady was: but all of us can make an effort to grow in faith, to be ready to accept God's will revealed to us in the Scriptures, the Church, our Superiors and the daily events in our life. This is not always easy: it requires submission to God's plan for us. Our Lady believed in God, and so she said her 'Yes' to Him."

The Sister who reported this little talk adds that if she had kept all the 'Good Nights' of that Novena, we would have now a little treasure of points stressing the reasons and the ways for devotion to Our Blessed Mother. "But there would be more to add", she says, "We would now have a clear and complete picture of Sr. Rina herself who was in fact projecing herself in the model of the Sister, whom she was advocating as a true devotee of Our Blessed Mother.

As for the Feast of the Immaculate, so for the Month of May and other Feasts in honour of Mary, Sr. Rina would arouse fervour in her community by proposing to the Sisters and pupils special prayers, little 'nosegays', daily acts of renunciation and acts of charity. She would often repeat: "When we were girls we would be so enthusiastic about doing so many

little things in honour of Our Lady as an expression of our love. Now that we have grown in religion, we should do much more."

Other Devotions

Sr. Rina considered love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus not just as any other devotion, but rather as the kernel of all devotions. Sr. Marykutty of the Sacred Heart affirms: "More than her words, her wonderful example has taught me to love the Sacred Heart of Jesus passionately. Once I was entrusted by her to prepare the chart of the Guard of Honour to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On finishing it she encouraged me saying: 'Now I think you will be very happy, because in this way you have achieved something practical to honour Jesus.' Her optimistic outlook on life was a source of encouragement to people to progress in virtue.

Dear St. Joseph had a special corner in the heart of Sr. Rina. His love for humility and work was so attractive to her ! She constantly wished that she could be able to imitate him in these two virtues. But we must say that St. Joseph was dear to her also because he is the saint of difficult cases. He would intervene for her in impossible circumstances.

Sr. Rina would look forward to the Feast of the Apostles and the great Saints of the Church as to powerful land-marks that would remind her of greater commitment in her love for God and souls.

St. John Bosco and St. Mary Mazzarello to Sr. Rina were more than favourite Saints and Protectors. They were her models. It could not be otherwise, being the Founder and Co-foundress of her congregation. They were the Rule of life,

the inspiration of whatever she would think and say and do. She knew everything about them: she would read repeatedly their biographies. In their lives she found veritable mines of inspiration and teaching. As one of her pupils has to say: "We were enchanted by her way of talking on Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. It gave us the impression that she had lived with them and she was just repeating what she herself had seen them doing or heard them saying."

A last trait

Sr. Rina's Salesian piety made her a great lover of the Church and admirer of the Pope. She looked up to the Pope with the same veneration that she had learnt from Don Bosco. She personally was very much interested in knowing about the Popes, what they did, said, and repeated those sayings and episodes to children and Sisters alike. Pope's Day was celebrated in her communities with special solemnity. She liked to join in the manifestation of devotion to the Pope as organized by the local church. She found these celebrations a powerful reminder of the unity and catholicity of the Church, especially in the context of the North-Eastern States, where numerous Protestant Churches would combat the Pope and the Catholic Church.

It will not be out of place to relate here what happened when she went home for the last time. She jumped at the opportunity of going to Rome. From a letter she wrote from there on that occasion we see clearly that the reason for going there was principally to see the Pope. Perhaps this time there was also another reason that may have motivated her. It was November 1964: the Second Vatican Council was going on. During the whole progress of the Council she had shown great interest in it and had made people aware of the good

results the Council was achieving. Some of the Sisters refer that often at the 'Good Night' talks she would address the community about some special points that had been decided at the Council. She usually would end with a thought about the greatness and sanctity of the Catholic Church and its leaders, the Pope and the Bishops.

The following letter, written by Sr. Rina on that occasion, refers also to several other little news, which are very interesting from the point of her concern for everybody, but especially for those dear to her. It is written to her own brother Severino and his family, who were then settled in Australia. It speaks of Sr. Assunta FMA, a niece very dear to her—in fact she looks much like Sr. Rina. It speaks of Fr. Peter Cesarin SDB, referred to earlier in this life-sketch. It hints to Fr . Luciano, then convalescing in Australia.

Rome, 15th November 1964

Dearest Severino, Ida, nephews and nieces,

As you see I am writing from Rome, where I have come for a few days to see the Pope and the Bishops at the Council. Fr. Peter knows everything of Rome and so I could go with him to the Vatican. We have seen the Pope very close to us. As he was passing in front of us, people were clapping hands and shouting 'Vivas'. I too shouted 'Viva il Papa'. Fr. Peter stopped me saying we should not shout, yet....

After that we went to St. Peter's Square. St. Peter's was closed, because the Bishops—more than 2,000 of them—were in session, speaking and deciding for the good of the Church. I suppose you are reading all that in your newspapers. It is something grand !

I have been home and hope to go again before I leave definitely for India. Everybody is well there: we have spoken a lot about you all. They tell me to go to see you in Australia. If Australia were on my way to India, I would surely come. Next time !

How are you ? How is Suntilla (Sr. Assunta)? It's ages I do not hear from her. I hear Fr. Luciano is with you now. Treat him well: he needs to be cured soon to come back to India.

I remember you all in my prayers daily. Do you pray for me at the daily recitation of the Rosary ? I need your prayers very much....

With much love

Sr. Rina.

Special aspects of prayer

We may conclude this topic of the prayer life of Sr. Rina with some remarks that were and are still repeated by those who know her and lived with her. Sr. Rina believed in and had a special insight in the communitarian meaning of prayer. It is true that prayer is that spiritual power that binds man to God. But prayer is also that dynamic force that binds man to each other in Christ. Sr. Rina understood this well: through prayer she felt one with everybody: she prayed with and for everybody. She not only treasured community prayer, but also insisted on praying with the community of the children, with the people and with the Church. She also loved to pray for people and to have people pray for one another: she believed immensely in the value of intercessory prayer, as the most powerful means of helping each other and as the best gift for one we love and care for.

Perhaps this is the proper place to relate a short dialogue that was narrated by a person, who likes to be called Jane. It goes back to the time of her life in Bandel:

—Sr. Rina, how can I go on praying: it is all useless.
—What do you mean to say ? We have not prayed enough yet. Don't you think that what we ask is a grace that needs much prayer ?
—Yes, I do believe so. But at least we should like to see some change in them.
—Remember, Jane, that prayer is not only for them, but for us too. When we pray, we feel how small we are and how great God is.
—But they do not think our way. In fact they think only about causing evil to us and our work.
—We cannot say that. We should not say that, if we really want to be heard by God. God does not want us to think of them as enemies. In fact they are not enemies. Don't you think that when we really pray for them, they can become our friends? In fact we want their good, don't we? We would like them to see and do what is good.
—Sister, do you really think that this will ever happen ?
—Now I understand why we do not receive what we ask for. We first need to be good ourselves. We must believe it: God will listen, God can do everything. He can also do what we ask, if we have faith. Dear Jane, this is the starting point and it is the concluding point: God is everything in prayer and our way to him is our faith and our love."

A work which is prayer

Sr. Rina believed in work which becomes prayer. A life which is spent in the fulfilment of God's will, even if it is steeped in continual external activity it is a continuous saying

'Yes' to God, and so it becomes an uninterrupted prayer. It is true to state with many of her Sisters that Sr. Rina sanctified all her activities with very frequent short prayers and ejaculations and that these transformed her work in virtual prayer. Is it not what the Saintly Co-foundress did ? She would not allow fifteen minutes to pass without having raised her mind and heart to God in prayer. But we find something even more wonderful than tnat in the life of St. Mary Mazzrrello, and in imitation of her also in the life of Sr. Rina. The perfect abandonment to the will of God expressed in the joyful fulfilment of duty—even the hardest and most absorbing—was the best self-offering to God and therefore the best form of prayer. Sr. Rina could not think of herself and of her personal enjoyment while she would be spending her best energies at the service of her neighbour in the manifold tiring duties throughout her life. Sr. Rina realized that this was living for God and so it was life of prayer. She came to understand this truth even better in the last years and months of her life, when the unbearable sickness virtually took away from her even the power to recite a prayer. She confessed it to her superiors and Sisters that in those days her only way to pray was to live in union wih God. Trying to accept from him, paradoxically, even the impossiblity to pray as her best way of prayer.

Joy of prayer

We may conclude with a characteristic trait note Sr. Rina's prayer that struck everybody who knew her. For her prayer was joy. In other words, Sr. Rina impressed everybody with the lovableness of prayer. Prayer was the source of her joy and love, so much so that her joy in prayer would overflow and spread to others. She could not believe in oppressive or depressive prayer: she loved spontaneity in everything, but

especially in prayer. If prayer was not loved, she would conclude that there was some wrong approaeh to it. Everybody, especially children were made to understand what she would usually repeat: "God is our Father, Jesus is our Brother, Mary is our Mother. Then how can we not love to talk to them, to listen to them, to live with them ? The prayer that does not bring joy is not prayer !"

Perhaps now we may draw a lawful conclusion : her uninterrupted smile, her unconquered optimism, her relentless dedication to duty, her self-sacrificing love towards her neighbour and her invincible courage in the face of opposition and suffering, had their origin in her life of prayer and union with God.



14. With Christ on the altar

The greatness and dedication of a person is best proved in times of difficulties and trials. Such circumstances require endurance and capacity to steer towards sanctity, along a path traced out by God, which one comes to know through a process of keen discernment of his will. The last years of Sr. Rina's life powerfully bring out her spiritual stature as the "Strong Woman" of the Scriptures (Ecl. 26), who lives in the peaceful understanding that God is always a good Father. "How often have I offered up myself to Jesus ! Yet only now I have understood the full implication of my offering. He has fully accepted me on his altar as his victim of love for souls.... He is the Lord. His will be done !" It is not difficult to guess what she was alluding to in these words from her letter to Fr. Luciano dated: 24th March 1963.

She had already undergone the first urgent operation which was carried out at the Welsh Mission Hospital in Shillong by Dr. Albert Hughes in 1961. Sr. Rina had gone to see the doctor, who found that she had to undego mastectomy immediately. She went back to the community and announced casually that the following day she had to go to the hospital for an operation but that nobody should worry about it, she would be back soon. She asked for the prayers of the Sisters and went. The operation was successful, but cancer—for it was cancer—had already affected other parts of the body, such as the throat and the chest.

Sr. Rina's words on her being called to be a 'victim on the altar' alludes to something else besides her physical pains—something that sometimes would make her 'shiver' : it was misunderstanding, ill-will and even calumny by those who should have been her best support. God permitted all this perhaps in order to purify her, to make her more acceptable to himself. This has ben the sad lot of most of God's best friends, it was in fact the tragedy of Christ himself. Sr. Rina who loved, esteemed and obeyed her superiors most devotedly and was all affection and understanding for her Sisters, could not have felt hurt by anything more keenly than duplicity, suspicion and even malicious and slanderous talk.

The ever-kind heavenly Father had been preparing Sr. Rina for this heart-rending situation gradually for several years through certain events that were meant in his plan to lead her to a closer union with him and to a fuller abandonment to his will.



A great Profession Day in Nongthymmai



Sr. Rina with Fr. Ziggiotti, Rector Major



Mother Merlo, Provincial, by Sr. Rina



Sr. Rina in her last repose

First departure

It all started with the death of Mother Avio on 20th November 1959. Sr. Rina had an unbounded esteem for this saintly Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. She had come to know her, as we have seen, in their first voyage to India: since then she admired her for her human and religious virtues. But the two never lived together until after the blessing of the house at Nongthymmai. Then, for reasons of health, Mother Avio was assigned to that community to the immense joy of Sr. Rina, still the superior. Sr. Rina felt that through her exemplary religious life Mother Avio would have been a pointer to sanctity for all the Sisters of Nongthymmai. She herself tried to imitate Mother Avio's true humility, charity, patient endurance in sickness, uninterrupted union with God and especially her exact observance of the Rules.

An episode will illustrate especially this last point. Often when Sr. Rina went about the courtyard humming some tunes or singing some hymns —"that soul ever in festal mood" (Mother Maria)—or when in her expansive way she would raise her voice to call some workers or to remind the teachers or pupils of something, Mother Avio would appear at the window of her room and clap her hands to remind Sr. Rina of the rule of silence . Sr. Rina with the candour of a child would turn round and humbly acknowledge: "Sorry, Mother. I had forgotten. Thank you !"

All the community gained from the presence of Mother Avio, who would spend her days in humble chores, such as mending the socks of the Sisters —she took this as her privilege—and in prayer for the needs of the house in general and of each sister in particular. Sr. Rina herself learnt a lot from the simplicity and deep spirituality of this Religious in the

intimate moments of the 'manifestation', when Mother Avio would approach her, the superior, with the simplicity and faith of a novice.

As days passed the health of Mother Avio declined. Sr. Rina tried to convince her to be visited by Dr. A. Hughes of Welsh Mission Hospital in Shillong, but to no avail. Only when at the insistence of Mother Provincial Mother Nilde Maule of the General Council then visiting the province persuaded her, did Mother Avio allow herself to be operated of cancer. Although the operation was successful, yet the advanced state of the sickness could not be controlled. After some weeks she died a saintly death leaving the community, but particularly Sr. Rina, in deep sorrow. She felt she had lost a poweful help.

Separation costs

Shortly after the death of Mother Avio came another blow for Sr. Rina, the transfer of the Provincial, Mother Catherine Mania, to the Southern Province to be the provincial there. More than a blow, it was a turning point in the life of Sr. Rina. By the many references made in this book to Mother Mania, the reader will have understood that between these two Daughters of Mary Help of Christians their had been a deep relationship. Even since their first encounter in Tezpur, Sr. Rina had found in Mother Mania an unchanging friend, a most loving mother and an understanding superior. Both of them had won reciprocal confidence and love to a surprisingly high degree. Mother Mania understood the talents of Sr. Rina and could entrust her with any work, on the other hand Sr. Rina could lean on Mother Mania for any and every kind of support. With great trust in God and hard toil both of them would work together to establish the newly erected Northern Province of the Immaculate Heart of Mary,

While working for the province they did not forget in anyway their own personal sanctification. Both in their own respective ways contributed much to each other's progress in virtue. They kept on working together and helping each other in intimate terms. Never did they come across a single disagreement which would dim the beauty of their relations. Natutally in the case of a different point of view, it was always Sr. Rina who would give in, because of her deep belief that God's will was expressed in the words of her superior. Sr. Rina felt that in the transfer of Mother Mania she was going to lose a cherished treasure, a pearl of great price and humanly speaking an irreplaceable friend and superior. The future bore witness to this fact.

One of the Sisters wrote: "Mother Mania's transfer was the cause of great sorrow for all of us, but it was most painful for Sr. Rina. When the day of departure came we bade good-bye to our beloved Mother Mania amid sobs and tears, a mother who never put on an air of superiority or authority in her behaviour. Sr. Rina accompanied Mother with a heavy heart to Gauhati airport. The last parting embrace spoke volumes for what they had been to each other and of the sorrow they experienced at their separation". Mother Mania herself wrote of that parting moment with the following words: "It was a rather painful parting on the part of all. Sr. Rina—brave soul!—found words of encouragement and comfort for the departing Superior she had been wonderfully good to, and who had heartily repaid her with affectionate and boundless trust."

Friends leave

The transfer of Sr. Francesa Martina, the novice-mistress, from Nongthymmai to Bandel proved to be another big trial

for Sr. Rina. It happened in February 1962. One of the novices of that time wrote: "One afternoon I saw Sr. Rina weeping. I prudently inquired of the reason. She said that Mother Mistress had been transferred to Bandel. It came like a bolt from the blue for all the members of the community, but it was surely more for Sr. Rina. The two had come to know each other during the construction of Nongthymmai, since both of them were housed at Mawlai. But they became closer when the novitiate was transferred to Nongthymmai. They worked hand in hand for the smooth running of both the house and the Novitiate. There was not a single activity in the house in which Sr. Martina did not cooperate, while Sr. Rina on her part saw to it that the novices lacked nothing spiritually or materially. They planned together, consulted and counselled each other for the better running of the community. They seemed to have but one heart and one soul."

Perhaps this is the best place to relate what Sr. Martina herself has to say about Sr. Rina. She wrote: "Sr. Rina would bring along enthusiasm in whatever she was doing: she had a unique way of communicating that same enthusiasm to everybody who was with her. When we worked with her we felt our work light, since we were carried by the power of her enthusiasm. In so doing she would get everything done well by the children and the Sisters alike.

"Her enchanting ways were a valid asset in the preparations of grand and fruitful celebrations. She made use of singing, entertainments and other means with the purpose of making people happy and in order to do good to them. She would not spare herself in anyway: she would be the moving power in the oratory and in the youth associations. How happy she was at seeing numerous groups of children for the First Communion or groups of girls belonging to the different

sodalities around the altar or the statue of Our Lady. Even later on when her illness was weighing her down, she would not miss the Oratory and would willingly take up her role as its leader.

"Sr. Rina loved the poor much: she understood them in their difficulties and helped them. How many times she would ask the novices for prayers for a boy who could not go to school or who had no job. They would often come to Sr. Rina to tell her of their sorrows and she helped them out in the best way she could. How many families have been brought out of sheer misery through the help of Sr. Rina, who would also ensure that they became good.

"Due to her care never was anything wanting to the Sisters and the novices. She had a motherly concern especially for the sickly and those more in need. She would never allow any bickerings in the community. If she came to know of something that was not proper, she would unmask the fault and try to remedy it with utmost openness and firmness".

Knowing how much they meant to each other, we do not wonder that both felt the separation very keenly. This time Sr. Rina accompanied Sr. Martina as far as Bandel. She felt it was her duty to escort her up to the new place since Sr. Martina had never been there before. And then she had to tell Our Lady of Bandel that she needed her help to carry her cross up to the end.

War in sight

Two other events happened during this time which aggravate the painful situation. In October 1962, the sudden invasion of the North-Eastern States by the Chinese any

brought unprecedented anxiety and distress to all the people of the region. The Indian army was not in a position to offer resistence to the treacherous intruders. Neither did the Government Officials stand as a protective inspiration to the bewildered inhabitants. Only the Catholic Missionaries, guided by their Bishops, stood at their place. Bishops Stephen Ferrando SDB and Orestes Marengo SDB rushed back to their dioceses from the Vatican Council Sessions. Brothers and Sisters in formation were ordered to move to safer places. Sr. Rina after seeing her younger Sisters to safety, offered to stay on at her post and place in Nongthymmai, Shillong. She had experience of the ravages of war: that notwithstanding she made her choice to stay.

Fr. Ivan Giacomello has something to say about the behaviour of Sr. Rina regarding her decision to stay on. He wrote: "During the threat of the Chinese invasion of 1962 preparations were made here in Shillong to face the emergency. Sr. Rina said: "If the Superiors command me to leave, I shall obey. But if it depends on me, I shall remain." Probably she had contacted her brother, Fr. Guido, who was then in Tangla (Assam). While the tea-planters were runnimg away, he had assured his people, who were afraid of being left alone, that he would remain with them. Seeing the determination of persons like Sr. Rina, Fr. Guido and others, all the Catholic Fathers in the missions decided to stay on even during the Chinese invasion. It was not so with the Protestand Ministers, who chose to run away.

"Although regular activities had been suspended, Sr. Rina was busy in the service of her beloved poor, who in that situation needed her even more than before. Everyday she distributed food and clothes to everybody who needed them. Sometimes in her generosity she even gave away

personal clothes of the Sisters to the poorer people. It was amusing to see children at the oratory running about with garments that had Sisters' names."

Providentially the threat of the Chinese invasion lasted only two months. Christmas 1962 was again celebrated in joyful thanksgiving to the Lord and to Mary, Help of Christians—the Patroness of the North-Eastern region—for having saved her blessed land from the calamity of war and invasion.

Sr. Rina together with Sr. Josephina Gaod then Superior of Jowai, thought of a thanksgiving outing for all the Sisters who had stayed on in the Khasi Hills during the Chinese invasion. The Sisters who had taken part in that joyful family get-together still remember it as a token of Sr. Rina's deep concern and affection for her Sisters. This care-free sisterly gathering achieved what it was meant to: it boosted the spirit of all the participants after the fears of the emergencey and helped the Sisters to go ahead with renewed enthusiasm to greater apostolic commitment. What makes us wonder about Sr. Rina's behaviour at this time is that nobody could guess from her appearance that she was suffering intensely for several reasons. When Sr. Rina would sometimes speak of her acute pains, some irresponsible people went so far as to accuse her of pretension and dissimulation. That cut her to the quick. The fact is that her sickness, after the first operation had subsided for some time. Yet it had been gnawing at her health steadily until it burst violently at the beginning of 1963.

Death knocks at the door

Just then a very sad event shook every body in the Community at Nongthymmai and even in Shillong: the early death of Sr. Alfreda Diengdoh, the first Khasi Sister. She was young

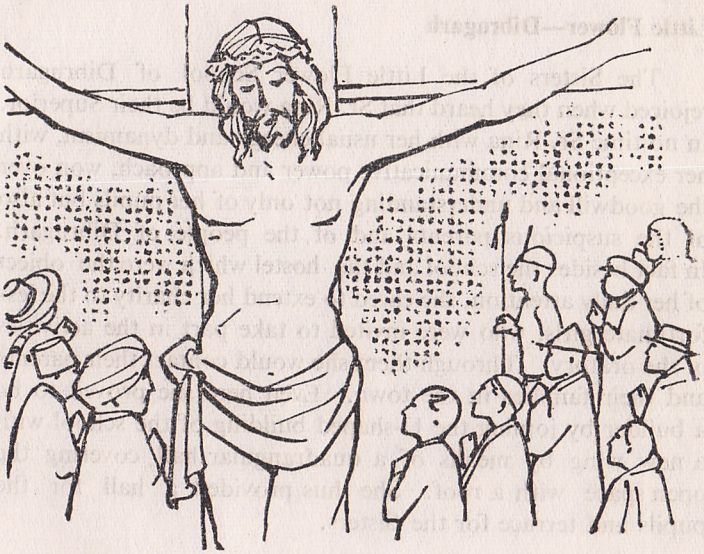
and promising. She had come to the house at Nongthmmai for treatment. It was thought that this would have been the best place for her, since facilities were there, and then there was the care of Sr. Rina. But despite the tenderness and care of the superior and her community, nothing could be done to halt the sickness which had gone beyond the possibility of recovery. Sr. Alfreda died on 18th February casting everybody into deep sorrow and perhaps it affected for the worse the health of Sr. Rina, who had a special affection for the deceased Sister.

Sr. Rina soon after that event had to be urgently admitted to the Welsh Mission Hospital of Shillong. Dr. A. Hughes attended to her again with care and expertise. The operation followed soon after her entry into the hospital. Everything went well also with this second operation, but for a sudden complication, which if not detected in time, could have proved fatal for Sr. Rina.

Sr. Magdalena Caspani has the following to say about the incident: "During the first days after the operation I had the fortune of assisting Sr. Rina at night. On the very first night she complained of severe pains at the back of the right shoulder. I was close to her but although a nurse myself I could not do anything for her. I would see now and then a silent tear roll down her cheeks out of pain and hear her say: 'What pain I feel at my shoulder". The nurses would come every fifteen minutes and also the doctor would come often to see her and administer some medicines. They would say nothing. Only when the danger was over, I came to know that a blood clot had lodged in the lungs: it might have caused the death of Sister. At the hospital Sr. Rina was the friend of all the nurses and a good example to all the hospital inmates. Everybody was happy to be with her and to do her a little service,

while at the same time she would not have liked to disturb anybody."

God willing she came home from the hospital: it took a long time to get back sufficient strength to carry on her duties, as superior of the vast institution of Nongthymmai. Not



everything was well with her yet when in July of the same year Sr. Rina was asked to take up the direction of the school and community of the Little Flower in Dibrugarh. Transfers are a normal feature in the life of a religious. Sr. Rina had been across the length and breadth of the Province and surely in normal conditions she would have been the happiest person to accept that assingment from God through her superiors. But due to her present health condition, this transfer, according to Dr. Hughes' affirmation would have

accelerated her end. To Sr. Rina its implications would be even greater because of her particular involvement in the house of Nongthymmai. But "she obeyed promptly and cheerfully, as it was her natural and religious disposition" (Mother Merlo). In fact, except for a few very close friendly Sisters, nobody noticed any difference or difficulty in her.

Little Flower—Dibrugarh

The Sisters of the Little Flower School of Dibrugarh rejoiced when they heard that Sr. Rina would be their Superior. In no time Sr. Rina with her usual energy and dynamism, with her exceptional communicative power and approach, won over the goodwill and understanding not only of her pupils but also of the suspicious parents and of the people of Dibrugarh. In fact besides the school and the hostel which were the object of her daily attention, she cared to extend her charity to the less fortunate girls, who were invited to take part in the activities of the oratory. Through them she would contact their parents and their families in the town. Even here she proved to be a builder by joining the U-shaped building of the school with a new wing by means of a quadrangular hall, covering the open space with a roof. She thus provided a hall for the pupils and terrace for the Sisters.

His Grace Hubert D'Rosario sdb, Archbishop of Shillong-Gauhati writes about her days in Dibrugarh: "I have known Sr. Rina only for a short while during the few months that she was in Dibrugarh when I was the Bishop there. From the little I know I can say that she was very motherly, kind and good. She loved the poor very much. When some Sisters are engaged in conducting schools, boardings etc. for the richer children, they often forget and neglect the poor. But Sr. Rina was not like that. She was all for the poor. This

I remember very clearly about her and it impressed me very much. She was also very zealous and ever cheerful."

Bishop O. Marengo sdb adds: "During the short time that she was in Dibrugarh my rare and brief contacts with her were more than enough to reveal her to me as a very exemplary religious, a great soul and a big heart belonging entirely to God, while showering her bounty wherever there was a need to soccour, a help to be given, a person to be encouraged, something to edify both materially and spiritually. I felt she united in herself all the excellent qualities of those Salesian brothers of hers whom I have known: deep piety, cheerfulness, great activity, initiative and courage, once she knew that some undertaking was for the greater good of souls."

Something very revealing happened at this time. It is again Bishop Marango who relates it in the following way: "Once she came to me rather disturbed to tell me that she had heard from people rather disparaging remarks about an influential person in our community. I was also aware of the rumours but lacked the courage to call and tell the person concerned for fear he might resent the Bishop for too easily believing in people's talk. Sr. Rina said: "Monsignor, I understand your delicate situation. If you think it proper I will talk to him myself". In those simple and courageous words, I sensed all her love for God and her chaste affection and interest for souls dedicated to him. Her great love of God was evident in her enlightened missionary zeal."

Last visit to Italy

During her stay in Dibrugarh she was asked by the then Mother Cesira Gallina, her provincial, to accompany Sr.

Luigina Saletta, who was very sick, to Italy. This would have been also an opportunity for Sr. Rina to have herself visited and possibly cured in Italy.

Sr. Rina most gratefully agreed to go to Italy because she really wanted to meet the Major Superiors and her old Sisters companions in Turin, to visit again the places of her formation and first years of religious life and in particular to pray at the feet of Our Lady Help of Christians in her shrine. In fact as she reached Italy she went immediately to Turin, the centre of Salesian origins and life.

How many happy memories came back to her mind and heart as she hurriedly passed through the places so dear to her: the Shrine, the Mother House, Mother Mazzarello House, Casanova, Arignano. She spent a few days in Mornese, at Nizza; she passed through Becchi and Castelnuovo. She almost forgot she was sick and very sick: she did not pray for a miracle either at the altar of Our Lady, Help of Christians or in front of the glorious relics of the Founder Saints.

Her greatest consolation and joy, as she wrote to Sr. Tilde Galli (we referred to it earlier), was the affection and assurance of esteem she recieved from Mother General and the other Superiors: "They believe me, they trust me and they love me as ever before !" This was soothing balm for her physical and moral pains: she considered it as the greatest grace and the best fruit of her going to Italy. Now she was ready to return to India.

She met so many of her past-pupils—those for whom she had worked when she was at Mother Mazzarello House, in the oratory and in the school so many years ago. They had now grown, but still remembered gratefully their educator

and Sister. They would not let her go back to India, especially when they percieved that she was not well. They would have forced her to stay for reasons of health. This she would not hear even form her sister and not even from the Superiors, to home perhaps she did not disclose the seriousness of her illness just no to be kept back. In fact she had written to one of her Sisters in India: "I wish to come as soon as possible to my mission. I want to die in India, the land of my dreams and of my love."

Farewell to Casarsa

In the meantime she rushed to her native place, where she had planned to stay for a few weeks. In the few days she remained there she tried to visit everybody: her brother and sisters and their families, the relatives and friends, her old companions and the associations to whom she had belonged. To everybody she spoke of the joy of her vocation and of the missions with so much unction that a new wave of missionary enthusiasm was arisen in that missionary town. Before the the end of two weeks, she was suddenly called back to India. Immediately she left for Turin without wishing anybody, perhaps because she would no stand it or may be because she still hoped to come back to them. Her sister Cecilia writes: "We were still hoping to see her back, when we heard that she had already set off for India. We missed her a lot and with her we missed a trip to Rome, where we had planned to go together to see the Pope. In fact she had suggested that trip adding: "Well, it is not so much Rome that matters, but the Holy Father: he is our guide and leader, he is the Vicar of Christ!" On her way back to India, she had the opportunity of seeing Rome and paying her filial homage to the Holy Father. Later on she often referred to this trip to Rome and spoke warmly of the impression of faith created in her by seeing so many

thousand of people listening to the Holy Father and shouting slogans of 'Viva il Papa!"

Back to Nongthymmai

Back she was in Dibrugarh at her post as Superior! For sometime she worked with all energy and dedication, but soon she felt again overcome by weakness and pains. Referring to this time, Mother Teresa Merlo, Provincial, writes:" In 1965 I met Sr. Rina again in Dibrugarh. I had just come from my previous assignement in Japan and Thailand. She had just returned from Italy, where she had gone for health reasons. She was another person: she looked tired, older....I was moved at seeing her in that shape. She told me: 'I have worked hard for the Lord these past years. Now I feel that he wants that I should glorify him not by my work, but by suffering.' She was humble and deeply religious: serene and calm even in this moment of trial.

"I found that in the heat of Dibrugarh it was difficult for her to breathe and to rest. She wrote to her doctor in Shillong asking what she should do. That doctor replied that she should go back to Shillong at once. The climate of Dibrugarh was not suited to her."

"At Dibrugarh", continues Mother Merlo, "Sr. Rina had become so greatly loved and esteemed that the Sisters, the school-students and boarders and even their parents found it difficult to part with her. Even after she left, her memory kept on in Dibrugarh: in later years I have met parents who had given the name of Rina to their children in remembrance of Sr. Rina."

Hoping that rest and proper treatment in a suitable place

would help her to get out of her present illness, Mother Provincial relieved Sr. Rina of all responsibilities and transferred her to Nongthymmai. She reached there on 14th May, the Feast-day of St. Mary Mazzarello, an auspicious day to be sure. There was joy in the community, also because of Sr. Rina's being back with them . Sr. Rina shared in that family happiness, but her condition compelled her to take to bed.

The following day she went to the Welsh Mission Hospital and met Dr. Hughes, who had been treating her right from her first operation. This time he realized that another operation would only worsen her condition, so he decided on therapy rather than on surgery. New modern medicines were used and experimented on her and she undertook the treatment with confidence and courage. She herself spoke of her condition in a short letter to Fr. Luciano, perhaps more to encourage him, who at the time was suffering of a sore throat.

Nongthymmai, 28th May, 1965

Ciano dear,

Your write so seldom that it makes me think you are very busy. If that is so, thanks be to God. Keep on working for souls, but do not forget yourself and me too.

Instead I have plenty of free time now-a-days, but too little will-power. Perhaps it is the amount of medicines I am taking at this time. I am going to the hospital for check-ups very often and the doctor keeps on precribing new medicines. I feel giddy and sleepy after taking these medicines and some times I do not know what I am doing or what I should do. The Lord knows.

I would never wish anything like this to anybody and surely not to you. You wrote of a sore throat. Please have yourself checked by a doctor. A bad throat may mean so many things. Anyhow be sure that I am with you all the time. I am praying for you: I can do only that, I would like I could do it well.

Pray for me that, if it is the will of God, I may get well. That means a miracle ! Ciao ! With love,

Sr. Rina

Jesus alone

To her physical and moral pain yet another one was added: inactivity. For the woman she was, this was a big trial. She was commanded to rest, to stop all external activities. She who had been always so active. could not believe it. And yet she was bound to pass her days either in bed or in the chapel.

She chose to be near Jesus in the tabernacle and Our Blessed Mother in the chapel: there she would find the strenght to offer herself as a victim to God, from there she could continue her apostolate through prayer for souls, for her Sisters and their works, and for all the persons she could remember. She confessed: "I pray and look at Jesus in the tabernacle. I think and meditate.... but often I have no strength to continue. Then I just sit by and allow Him to look at me, happy to be in his presence....Sometimes I think it a grace to have been compelled to this situation. I need him and only him....How many Rosaries I keep reciting everyday ! I think Our Blessed Mother will be happy to hear her name repeated a hundred times, even though sometimes I do not find it possible to think of what I am saying....She is a mother and she understands !"

Referring to a proposal from the doctor, that it would be better for the health of a cancer-stricken person to involve her in some responsible work, Mother Merlo writes: "At this time in agreement with the doctor I proposed to Sr. Rina to accept the direction of the house of Mawlai. She accepted to obey as she would always do, with faith and abandonment. But she added: 'After all, it will be only for a little while.' Accordingly in compliance with the will of the Superior, Sr. Rina moved on to her new and last destination of Mawlai as Superior. It was August 1965".



15. To the Father



It is written of St. Mary Mazzarello that once while lying on her bed of sorrow she suddenly sat up and clasping the crucifix in her hands, as if in ecstasy she began to say: "My Jesus, if I had been on the way to Calvary with you, I would not have allowed you to carry the cross wearing those thorns around your head. I would not have allowed those villains to beat and ill-treat you....If I had been there, I would have embraced you and would have taken all your sufferings upon myself....I would have done that most surely ! Now grant me to suffer much, grant me also much strength and much patience. My Jesus, I want to love you now and for ever !..."

Back to responsibility

These might have been the feelings and expressions also of Sr. Rina as she took upon herself the responsibility of the direction of the community of Mawlai: it was a big complex institution with many and different activities. There were over eight hundred children, from kindergarten to high school to be cared for. There was a huge hostel. There was a very active oratory and sodalities not only for the girls, but also for the mothers. There was "home-visiting" by the Sisters and missionary work in the villages. And then there was always that openness to any work of apostolate in favour of the people of the growing parish. Sr. Rina was called to animate all these activities.

In healthier days work and responsibilities would not have in the least affected her. In fact, it would have made her happy: she would have been the leader in all these activities and would have added others too. But now she just felt she did not have the strength to do what she had been doing in the past. She would have very much liked to do all, but she felt that her worn-out and sick body was not obeying her any more. This painful condition caused her incredible distress: it humiliated her—and she took it as humble submission to God's will.

At her simple welcoming reception in Mawlai there was great joy in the Sisters of the community and in the hostel and to the school. They all knew her and they loved to have her as their superior and mother. She pledged to dedicate herself for their good, but she asked them all to help her so that she may be of some use to them. Two things she would give to everybody generously: her encouragement and her beaming smile. She did that throughout her life, as many affirmed, Never did she appear so encouraging and so motherly as during these last few years and months of her life. Everybody felt that she was all for them.

Silver Jubilee

On 5th August 1965, Sr. Rina celebrated the Silver Jubilee of her religious profession. She was invited to Nonghtymmai, it being the Provincial house was also the house for the retreat, for that occasion. As customary at the end of the Retreat in August there was great joy for the newly professed Sisters. But that year there was greater happiness because of the 25th anniversary of Sr. Rina's consecration to God and men. She was the only jubiliarian that year and so she was felicitated the more by all. As 'Happy Returns' of that occasion were wished to her, she would add: "Yes, Happy Returns! Not here below, but in Heaven!"

Together with her Sisters Sr. Rina thanked the Lord for the gift of 25 years spent in the service of God and the poor. Yet, as Sr. Cleofe remarked she would still say: "How sad it is to see that there is still so much to be done for souls.... I feel miserable, because there is so little time left to spend for them !" It is proper to quote here the words of Mother Cesira, her past provincial, about Sr. Rina: "Sr. Rina lived her religious consecration totally, generously and joyfully. All those who had come to know her kept a lasting remembrance of her as a saintly religious."

On the same day of her Silver Jubilee she returned to her community of Mawlai. She loved to be with her Sisters and children. She would not leave her community except for greater needs. All her Sisters appreciated this trait in her. They felt happy and 'secure' with her. Even in those last months of her life, when she could do little in external activities, her Sisters would say to her: "Sister Superior, just be with us. Your presence is the best gift we may have from you."

That day, as she would do on all other occasions when she would come home, she stepped into the chapel. She liked to pray in front of the beautiful picture of the Sacred Heart (the house and chapel of Mawlai Convent are dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus). She found that devotion to the Sacred Heart was even more meaningful now—it was the symbol of the suffering love of Christ for all mankind, but especially for those who would even reject him. "How much would I do and suffer", she would say, "provided I could make Jesus loved by everybody."

As Superior she felt that her attention should be given to everybody equally in the community. To this end she would undertake to go round the whole house everyday to ascertain for heself that everything was going well with everyone. To her Sisters who would tell her to sit down in her room, she would reply: "How can I just sit down, when I have been given the responsibility to see and help everybody who needs my help ?"

After sometime in Mawlai, she undertook to make arrangements for several things that were badly needed, such as sufficient water supply, more bathing and washing facilities for the boarders, more room space for the Sisters. It was this unbroken chain of little acts of service, love and kindness that would win the affection and esteem of all the members of the community.

Filial devotion

A proof of the love she enjoyed from Sisters, teachers, chlidren and their parents alike, was shown on 25th November of that year, the feast-day of St. Catherine, her patron Saint.

Sr. Rina was happy to watch the activities of all the different members of the school, boarding and oratory who competed with one another to prepare for the entertainment in honour of their Superior. She would say that it was not for her alone that all this was prepared but that this was a sign of gratitude to all the Sisters of the house, and that ultimately it was a way of thanking God and his Blessed Mother, who made use of them as their humble instruments of love and service for the poor children.

That year the teachers, who had been her own past pupils of earlier years, for instance, showed their gratitude by offering warm quilts to all the Sisters of the house. The school presented a microphone which was much appreciated also in view of the fact that Sr. Rina, affected by cancer of the throat, could hardly be heard when she would speak to all the community without a microphone. On her feast-day it was a sight to see: the hall filled to capacity with gifts of all kinds. One gift that Sr. Rina appreciated most and which she would always aknowledge publicly was the 'spiritual bouquet' of prayers and reception of sacraments and of little acts of charity and denial that were offered for her intentions during the preparation for the Feast. She would say: "A celebration that does not make us and our children better is no celebration at all !"

Days and months of work rolled by heavily taxing every body in the community of Mawlai. With December the hostel and school closed: Sr. Rina felt somewhat relieved of the usual heavy work of having to drag herself from place to place, from class-room to class-room to visit and encourage every inmate in the school. As the other Sisters kept themselves very busy with the work of the house, Sr. Rina took herself to knitting: she would sit in the sun in the front garden and pass hours knitting and mending clothes. Who could

think that the active Sr. Rina would just be tied down to a chair and keep herself busy with a work which generally only elderly Sisters would do, while she was then just forty five years of age. Her illness was advancing. In spite of that she never took leave of a single community exercise. She was regular and punctual at every one of them. Even in the cold winter of that year, she would get up with the community and again together with them would she go to rest at night.

The last Christmas

Although the school and hostel were closed, the oratory was functioning in full swing. As Christmas was approaching the activities at the oratory increased. She would see personally that her dear oratorians would be prepared for the great Solemnity. That Christmas was really a great and happy one. She searched for the best and more suitable prizes for the children and arranged for a grand tea-party.

As regards the Sisters she tried her best to make everybody feel the joy of the season. Knowing that her absence to any community event would have made people unhappy, she tried to be present at every manifestation of community life. She was even present at the mid-night Mass and the short get-together that followed. She would not count the cost provided others felt happy.

On Christmas day, as in similar occasions, she tried to see that the children should have everything ready in time—their prizes, their Christmas tree, their tea-party—all after the solemn Eucharistic celebration. Although she had to drag herself around, she wanted to be with the children to give them pleasure. She had invited the chaplain of the convent, Fr. Gervasis, to distribute the prizes. She herself liked to call the names

of the children and invited them to choose their prizes. Even during the tea-party she moved around speaking to each one of the children and seeing that they lacked nothing. She felt happy in making them happy. Before they dispersed she promised a Christmas picnic and fixed the date for it.

On the appointed date, after a fervent Mass, Sr. Rina herself took them all with the help of the Sisters to Shillong Peak. She was thoughtful enough to see that even handicapped Julia be taken along. She said: "Poor girl! She can hardly have any other enjoyment. Let her have with us the benefit of this picnic." All this happened a few weeks before she would be compelled to take to bed for good.

After the busy days were over, she resumed her routine of knitting in the sun: that would be the only place to fight the cold of winter, since in those days nobody would ever think of the comforts of a heater. As evening would set in, she would retire for some time to the office to finish the correspondence. She had to check some of the usual files. She would then spend the rest of the long evenings in the chapel. Putting a blanket across her knees she would pass those hours in sweet colloquy with Jesus in the Tabernacle and with Mary, her dear Mother. Those hours were never too long. Only the bell would call her out of the chapel for some community event. She longed to share with the Sisters their life and interest. She loved to communicate to them the fruits of her experience with Jesus.

Sommoning all her strength, Sr. Rina pulled on in this way up to the Feast of St. John Bosco of January 1966. As in prevous years, this year the Sisters' community of Mawlai joined the Salesian Fathers across the road in celebrating the glories of their common Father and Founder. Sr. Rina

appreciated this common celebration: the two communities felt, as indeed they are, members of the one and same Salesian Family. Although her state of health would not have allowed her to go across, yet beacuse of the importance of the Feast she dragged herself along, not to miss the joy of that happy gathering.

Jesus calls again

At last unable to stand on her feet any longer on 3rd February she took to her bed. She lingered on for a week. Despite the tender and skilful care of the infirmarian, Sr. Catherine Migliasso, no improvement was seen. Sr. Rina had to be taken to the hospital on 11th February, feast of the Apparition of Our Lady at Lourdes. During the three months that followed Sr. Rina's life shone with increased spiritual brilliance: she became a model of patient and humble endurance in suffering and of complete surrender to the will of God.

When we are faced with the existence of suffering, our minds must naturally turn to the example of Jesus. We see him in Gethsemani, on his way to Calvary and on the Cross. Although surrounded by many people, only very few—a handful of them—understood him and somehow shared his mental anguish. But the Father was there! Sr. Rina too was surrounded by many, understood by a few, surely dearly loved by Jesus. The many evening hours spent in front the Eucharistic Lord prepared her for the time when she would be nailed to her bed of suffering.

Even her sickness was an opportunity of doing good to souls. always forgetful of self, she sought to console, encourage and edify all those who would go to visit her. There were days in which visitors were not allowed in, since she was

under intensive care. But on the days in which her condition seemed to be improving, visitors from all walks of life would flock to her. Everyone would be sad to take leave of her after having experienced the goodness of her presence, the sweetness of her company.

One of the greatest tortures she underwent during her last illness was, that even at this stage, the seriousness of her desease was not believed. The freshness and sereneness of her facial appearence betrayed her and it all looked as if she was pretending to be sick. Somebody even thought that her sickness was the fruit of her imagination. Sensitive and keen as she was she felt this very much and suffered in silence. Before all this happened she was heard to say often to her Sisters: "One of the greatest suffering we will have to undergo in religious life is not privations and poverty, but misunderstanding. Even more so, since in such cases both parties think they are right and do not mean to make the others suffer." This was the way she herself judged this painful situation; she was ready to find excuses for those, who misunderstood her.

Thinking of others

Just two days after Sr. Rina's admittance into the hospital, the girls came back to the boarding and the following day the school reopened. She kept following her community as closely as possible even from the hospital. She was ever concerned about the needs of everybody. She knew that since the rainy season was still far off, scarcity of water would have been felt by the Sisters and the 150 boarders. The water problem of Mawlai Convent had been haunting her since she had gone there.

Prudent and practical as she was, she knew that water is indispensable for the smooth running of an institution. Whenever she was asked to take construction of any building, she would always make certain that water was available in good quantity.

Even from the hospital Sr. Rina wanted to tackle the water problem of Mawlai. Several years before, especially through the insistence and intervention of Mother Mania, a deep well had been dug in the lower portion of the premises of Mawlai. In the course of time this well had been abandoned and nobody paid any attention to it anymore. Sr. Rina thought of this well as the only solution to the scarcity of water in the house of Mawlai. She wrote to Fr. Guido, hoping to have his assistance in having that deep well function again. Fr. Guido soon gathered his men and went to Mawlai. Confidently his men began that risky job: the well was 90 feet deep. Iron ladders were lowered and the well was completely cleaned, the pump was repaired, the rusty pipes replaced. On the day Sr. Rina returned from the hospital, after what everybody had thought was a miraculous cure, the water began to be pumped up again .

A miracle ?

It is good we mention something about 'the mirculous cure' we have hinted at. One evening as Bishop Ferrando payed her a visit, she sat up on her bed and said: "Your Excellency, a miracle! I am cured!"

"What good news, Sr. Rina! I am happy to hear it" exclaimed the Bishop.

"Yes, I feel really cured. I have no more fever. The doctor said that in a few days I will be discharged."

To the Sisters who would come to see her, she would say: "I never thought I would be cured of this sickness, instead see how good and merciful the Lord is. He wants me to spend some time more in serving and loving him here below. When Mother Provincial sent me to Mawlai I told her that I would not survive to make another Retreat. She repeated that I would get well. I never thought it would come true. My cancer had nearly reached the back-bone. The doctor had even said that I might have to become blind. Instead see how the Lord has preserved me from all that. How good he is: thank him with me!"

In fact, after three days, on the Saturday afternoon of 19th March, the Feast of St. Joseph, the eve of the Eucharistic Procession in the parish of Mawlai, Sr. Rina returned home from the hospital to her dear community. It was impossible to describe the joy of the Sisters and the children on her return, after about a month and a half of absence. She seemed altogether a new person. She went to the balcony with her usual smile, which looked even more charming now because it was filled with new hopes and new promises. The children burst in shouts of joy to welcome her.

The change was visible to everybody. Sr. Rina moved about briskly and happily as in her former days. In the evening she accompanied the community to the parish church for the triduum service in preparation for the annual parish procession. After supper and recreation, she went up for prayers and for a most inspiring 'Good Night'. Her face was beaming with joy as she spoke to the community of the graces the Lord and Our blessed Mother had showered on her and the community.

The next day she took part in all the religious services of the parish. After lunch she herself offered to decorate the

refectory: she placed the picture of the 'Last Supper' in the centre, above the Superior's chair. After that she went to the front of the house-building to see how things were prepared and decorated there, since the Eucharistic Lord was to pass that way during the procession. She did not actually walk in the procession, but she took part at the benediction that followed it in front of the church.



Everything seemed to go well for the rest of the day. With much enthusiasm, love and joy she entertained the Sisters, who had come from Nongthymmai and Ganesh Das Hospital.

On the following day, Monday, she was up again, active and enthusiastic but not like the previous day. It was thought that it was due to the fact that she had over-worked on Sunday. In the evening she was with the community at the supper meal. Before she could finish her soup, she got up showing a sign of taking leave and went out, to bed. That malignant fever had come back again.

On the cross

In a week's time she was again taken to the hospital. Good Dr. Hughes himself felt dissapointed. Again he put all his skill and attention to effect a cure, but he gave no hopes of recovery. Days went by and her condition deteriorated rapidly. Sr. Rina now knew that there would be no sweet surprise to look forward to or hope for. She just waited for Jesus to come.

Fr. Joseph Bacchiarello, a vetern Salesian missionary, who happened to be in the same hospital during this time writes: "I was in the Welsh Mission Hospital during Sr. Rina's last stay there. As soon as the doctor allowed me to move about, I used to go and have little chats with Sr. Rina. I could see how she suffered, yet she was always smiling. When she was told that there was nothing more that the doctors could do, she accepted God's will like a generous soul and asked to to be taken to her religious house to die there among her Sisters and children.."

One of her past-pupils who visited her on this occasion states: "When I went to visit her in the month of April, she told me to look at her and guess how much more she would live. Then she added: 'Actually I do not desire to live very much longer in this world. Pray for me, dear Melis, that

I may have a painless death !' With sobs and tears I joined her in prayers. When the prayer was over, we spoke together for quite a long time. She told me to prepare a drink for myself and I took it. As I looked at her I really felt that she would live long. So I told her: 'Sister, you look well and strong. I do not think God will take you away soon'. 'If that were so,' she said, 'I would be pleased to stay long. But I think that by the month of Our Lady, I will go back home'. Then she told me to give the writing pad and the pen and she began to write letters to her brothers, whom she would have liked to see, and to others."

We shall quote now from some of the letters that Sr. Rina wrote during her last sickness. They are very important witnesses to her state of body and mind, they are real gems revealing the brightness of her spirit in her quest for God and souls.

The following letter was written by Sr. Rina to her former Provincial, Mother Catherine Mania

V.G.! Long live Jesus !

Mawlai—Shillong
15.11.1965

Ever beloved Mother Provincial,

Perhaps you already know that I am at Mawlai since the month of July. I do not know what to say about myself... I feel better on every aspect, but yet there is still something that is not all right. The Lord besides does not give just one cross at a time and so I try to pluck up courage thinking that Heaven is wonderful !

Sr. Annie is with me, she helps in the correspondence for the House of Nongthymmai, she helps also Sr. Ancilla in her service to Sr. Antonietta. Sr. Anglesio, Sr. C. Migliasso, Sr. Amelia, Sr. M. Rodrigues and Sr. Marykutty are also with me. Sr. Marykutty of late has not been quite well: she had several attacks of bronchitis. As you see there are few persons who can run about, and you know that with our Khasi girls we need to run about. The house of Mawlai is not so complex and if I were really well, it would not offer any problem. But I suppose it is my sickness that gives me a feeling of 'oppression', that you cannot imagine.

I go about just like a 'robot'. I try my best to treasure up in the best way this condition of mine, which I feel will be the trial that will go along with me to the end. I deepen ever more my prayer life, I repeat continually short prayers, together with act of faith and love for the good God, but I feel that nothing elevates me. Even prayer has to be 'willed' and so all the rest.

Dr. Hughes tells me so many beautiful things...but I think it's a consequnce of my sickness. In everything I follow community life and those who look at me, congratulate me for the improvement they notice in my health. All along I pray for you. There is no day I do not remember you. Nothing has changed as regards my feeling towards you, to whom I owe so much. So I feel that this year my feast-day wishes are much deeper.

In the house nobody knows what is happening within me. It's my duty to keep up the morale of everybody.... Mother Provincial is very understanding, she encourages me to pass this time of illness with a spirit of resignation to the

will of God. For one thing, I am happy: in every occasion, I think, I have tried to understand people; at least I have tried to understand their good intentions....

...I do not know whether other Sisters of mine have passed or are passing through this night.... Perhaps you have had Sisters speaking to you about such painful things. Look Mother ! I do not feel any more that sense of joy, that enthusiasm of before. You well know how much I love the young. Well, now that I am among them, I feel like a peice of marble. I try to do my best, yet....

...Reading? You very well know how much I was reading! Now I cannot read any more, neither spiritual books nor any other books....God's will be done !... Heaven will be wonderful no doubt !. I pray for you. Sorry for this outburst. If I had you near me now, I would tell you so many other things !

Happy Feast, dear Mother Provincial ! May the good Lord give you plenty of consolations and many other graces. Wishes to dear Sr. Luigina. They tell me that Sr. Clotilde at Gauhati is getting better. Long Live Jesus ! Beloved Mother, consider me always as daughter.

affectionately Yours
Sr. Rina.

Sr. Luisa Miorelli's statement will be a good conclusion to this chapter. She writes: "By a special disposition of the good God, I happened to be in the same hospital where Sr. Rina was undergoing her last treatment. For 22 days I was close to her almost every moment, as far as the rules of the hospital allowed. Days passed with alternate hopes

and fears.... We spoke of our superiors far and near, of our dear ones of our convents' joys and sorrows. The fever never left her. One morning she told me: 'Sr. Louisa, our good Lord has chosen me. Really chosen me! And I try in my little way to console him. In my painful moments I repeat : 'He is the Lord !' At the end she would not desire to see any more visitors except the Sisters and her brothers. When I was discharged, and went to take leave of her, she told me: "I will never forget you." A week later I came back to Shillong to attend her funeral. Remembering her promise I asked her a grace which I had ever very much at heart. I can say that I received it instantly".



16. Amen

If what is generally believed is true, that the last days and hours of man are specially indicative of what he/she has been during his/her life, then we can affirm that the last days and moments in the life of Sr. Rina have revealed her virtues in a very positive degree.

For this reason in this last attempt to make her innermost life known, more than describing the last actions and events of her life, we shall try to discover the movements of her mind and heart. This will be apparent from a few very revealing letters she wrote in the last few months of her life and from the feelings and thoughts expressed in her short conversations and talks during her last days and moments. Of course, all along, her behaviour will be a supporting factor to whatever she wrote and said.

Mrs. B. T. Wylie was a dear friend and admirer of Sr. Rina. She and her family will be better known from these letters.

V. G.

Sacred Heart Convent
Mawlai—Shillong
16 .1. 66.

My dearest Mrs. Wylie,

I received your very sweet letter on Christmas Day. You are too good, dear Mrs. Wylie. Really, I do not know what I did to merit such love from you. Thank you for your prayers, for your Novenas, for your motherly interest and care. I don't even know how to express the feelings of my heart but I know you understand better like this.

I am not so bad in health after all. In fact Sr. Annie continues to say that I am progressing since my voice is a bit louder in these days. She does not realize that being holiday I hardly talk during the day and that I am much regular with my rest. Things which are sometimes impossible during the scholastic year with 850 pupils in the roll.

See what faith I have. Somehow I find hard to think myself worthy of a miracle. Dr. Hughes cares for me more than I can say. Last time he told me that I am one of the few who knows what will take them to the Lord, still he cannot say when....He has words of great faith as he always has. I am not a bit worried and if these will be the feelings which accompany me up to the last I don't think it will be a hard thing to die.

Anyhow now I am not dying yet. I can still help a little, I can keep the time-table of our community life and along with

the Sisters can make beautiful plans for the scholastic year which will start within less than a month. I am fortunate enough, I think and have great motives to be grateful to God !

When I tell the Sisters that I would like to help them more, to run up and down as I used to do, they say that it is more than enough what I do, only that I be able to sit in the office, or even lie in bed, as far as I am at home.... This is another motive to be grateful to God.

I continue to keep you in my intention along with Mr. Wylie, Regan, Hugh & Rose.

May God bless and repay you for all your kindness

Yours affectionately,
Sr. Rina

V. G.

Sacred Heart Convent
Mawlai—Shillong
20. 1.66

Dearest Mrs. Wylie,

Perhaps by now you have received my letter of a few days back. I just received your dear one written on the 12th. How very thoughtful you are ! But don't worry for me, even the sickness does its way: God gave me such an interior peace that nothing worries me. Perhaps God wants me to be really serious and then He will hear the prayers...or perhaps He thinks it not necessary that I should live long. I am so resigned and I would be very grateful to God if He would keep in me these same feelings till the end. After all no one is necessary in this world. We do the little we can till we live and when we die someone else will continue our work better. Of

course, I continue taking the medicines Dr. Hughes wants me to take. I have a nice two hours rest every day and I spend the rest of my time in little jobs which do not tire me at all. The Sisters are extremely understanding and helpful. I consider myself as very fortunate. Many other persons perhaps even rolling in wealth don't have half of what I have.

When I told my Mother Provincial, who is so very understanding, of some lumps growing around the wound of my first operation she said that perhaps it is better they come out... I know what they are but it is nice to think "it is better like that". I just tell you this confidentially because you know me so well and you took on me the care that not even a mother would be able to surpass. I am the least worried at present !

I pray now in a special way for Hugh that he may succeed in the exams. There studies are taken seriously, it is not such an easy affair as it would be here. We shall pray together dear Mrs. Wylie also for Regan and Rose who are not so "little" now. The sacrifices that both you and Mr. Wylie make to give them such a good position in life will not be without success. A few years more and you will see your children what you wanted them to be.

Sr. Annie and all the Sisters wish you and unite me in prayers. Best regards to Mr. Wylie and the children. With love and God bless.

Yours sincerely,
Sr. Rina

V. G.

Sacred Heart Convent
Mawlai—Shillong
17. 2. 66

Dearest Mrs. Wylie,

Yesterday I received your second letter. You really made me cry. How can I ever possibly repay you for such kindness. Thank you and please thank all, Mr. Wylie, Hugh & little Rose also. I try to repay you the best I can in my own way.

Do you know wherefrom I am writing to you ? Once again from the Welsh Mission Hospital.

I thought I had enough of sickness etc. when the good Lord wanted to show me that there was still place for something new and he sent me an "herpes zoster": you surely know what this is. A new experience and the most painful I ever had. I remained at home for ten days and was taking the medicines Dr. Hughes prescribed, but I tell you I thought I could not carry on any longer. It developed on the back a big blister and crosses my abdomen going round on the right side.

Since I came here I felt better. Doctor. could not have looked after his own sister with more care. He told me that he will send me home only when this kind of a wound is properly settled. I thank God and the Superiors who permitted me to be here these past 13 days. Complete rest, proper care etc. have done much good to me. I eat as I could not eat since a year now, feel much rested and stronger. And do you know the news ? Dr. told Mother Provincial that my real sickness seems to have been localized. I want to believe at this with all the powers of my being because I know what a great part optimism has in cures.

Thank the good God for me and when you will be going to Lourdes, oh, tell Our Lady how she has been wonderful towards me. I had you and yours much with me these past days. Please let me know when Hugh is going to have his exams. I will have our little innocent orphans praying in a special way. Kind regards to Mr. Wylie and children. With deep gratitude,

Yours
Sr. Rina

Mawlai
20.2. 66

Viva Gesu`!

Luciano dear,

In your last letter you did not mention having received my Christmas wishes. Anyhow I thank you for the wishes of all of you in Australia, which I would have really liked to be effective especially as regards to my health, since I still feel that I have not improved very much in the last few weeks. I need your prayers.

You tell me of your improving in health since you have been in Australia. I would think it could not be otherwise, with so much care that you get from Ida and children. You say you feel always tired and without any taste for anything. Dear Ciano, I only wish it stays at that, jaundice makes one feel that way.

I feel much the same as you, but for other reasons: sometimes I feel hopelessly helpless. I can do nothing and often I really do not even know what I am doing, except that I just abandon myself to God completely and tell him to see about me. What is happening to me I do not know. They say it's part of my troubles. I only ask Jesus to give me strength and his love. Pray for me.

How is Fr. Bepi: he too has had his share in the past. How is everybody: Severino, Ida, nephew, nieces and their families ? When are you coming back ? I'd wish to see you...come soon. Unless a miracle happens....Well, He knows better. From there you are going home, are you ? I keep on praying for you, that you may come back to India in good health and...soon.

Wishes to everybody. A loving embrace,

Sr. Rina

V. G.

Sacred Heart Convent
Mawlai—Shillong
9. 3. 66

My very dear Mrs. Wylie,

I cannot wait to write to you till Easter ! News are too good ! The miracle has come, you know! Oh, the faith of my superiors and Sisters and friends have won! I never thought I could live but now, oh, you should see, except for a slight sort of irritation on the throat and a sense of heaviness on my chest, nothing is left. Do you remember when I was writing to you about those lumps forming around the first scar? ...they just faded away, those throbbings under my arm-pits, peculiar of my desease have left me since a month. I have a strong appetite. I even feel ashame the way I eat, but after a year of fasting. The Bishop was here yesterday and told me he never saw me so well. What more ?

Thanks to you, to dear Mr. Wylie, to the children, for your prayers. And thank you for the prayers you will do for me at Our Lady of Lourdes. She knows how I want to recipro-

cate your kindness. The trouble now is to know who among the saints, to whom I have been entrusted, is the one who performed the miracle ! Everyone seems to have a special saint and I have a good number of relics hanging from my neck.

Better to thank all, to promise to be really holy and to spend the rest of my life in a more perfect way.

I keep myself busy all day long, prayer, thinking, planing, reading, writing, stitching and a hundred little other things which the Sisters ask me to do for the children. I have so much time even if I sleep quite long.

Mrs. Wylie dear, you are the person who knows about my illness more than anybody else, you have been in this line and so I don't feel shy to tell you.

My herpes is progressing. Yesterday Dr. was very pleased, only that it takes long for the skin to come up since it went so deep. But I was told that it will take about a week to go home.

I do not mind. God has been so very good to me and "nothing asking, nothing refusing."

You and Yours are always in my thoughts and prayers.

Don't bother to reply, God love !

Yours
Sr. Rina

Welsh Mission Hospital
17th April 1966

Dearest Mrs. Wylie,

Lying again for the past 4 weeks in this hospital, I was unable to thank you, dear Mrs. Wylie, for your letters. And now I come to you through one of my sister also here in the hospital. Mrs. Wylie dearest. I only stayed 3 days at home and then a continuous high fever 103F-104F compelled me to come back to the hospital. Doctors say it is the effect of the strong treatment I had and now are working hard to help me again ! I am very sad to know what has happened to your dear son ! Mrs. Wylie, I offer up all my poor prayers and sufiering so that he may be cured soon. I have sent your letter to dear Fr. Bianchi still lying in the hospital (Nazareth).

I do pray for you and your dear family every day. May God bless you all. Continue to pray for poor me ! So that I may go back to my poor children at Mawlai.

Thanking you again, I am yours very sincerely

Sr. Rina Colussi

Dear Mrs. Wylie, my fever came down to 100F, I am consoled—Pray for me—Fr. Guido came to see me.

Sr. Rina

The reading of the above letters has placed us in the right dispositions to understand the inner feelings and aspirations of Sr. Rina during the last days and hours of her earthly

existence. Sr. Catherine Susngi has something more to add to her spiritual picture. She writes: "I never saw Sr. Rina sad or dejected, except on the Thursday before her death. She was then in the Welsh Mission Hospital. She fully realized the seriousness of her condition. Reflecting now after some years, I think that then she felt lonely, very lonely —the overpowering loneliness that Christ himself felt, when he exclaimed, 'My God, why have you forsaken me ?' I feel now so sorry that in spite of partly realizing her situation, I did not have the courage to stay there by her bed-side. She, who was always all to all especially to the poor, the sick and the suffering, had then to undergo that terrible loneliness. That evening I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. Perhaps she thought I was too young to share her sorrow. She was in fact going to speak, when an elderly Sister came in and I had to leave the room. Since I did not get a chance to go back to her, she sent her last words to me: "Tell, Sr. Catherine, I'll remember her !"

"Be it what it may, I am convinced that Sr. Rina's work for souls reached its climax, not when she was playing with us at the oratory, not when she with her own hands was unloading bricks and sacks of cement for the building of the Provincial House, not even when she was lovingly surrounded by her novices and Sisters, but there on that bed, on her last Thursday on earth !"

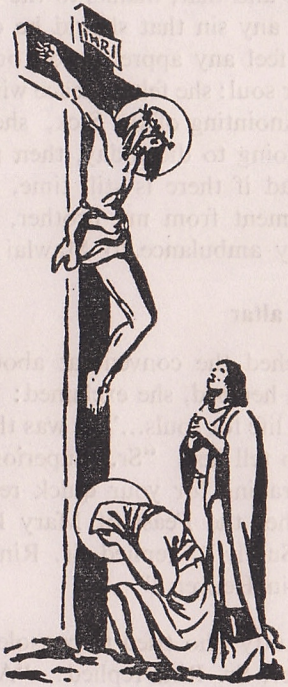
Let us follow her in her now complete offering of self to the Father.

30th April 1966

The doctor's diagnosis about Sr. Rina's condition was: "Cancer has reached its last stage: almost all the diaphragm

is paralised, the vocal cords are almost completely dead and the infection has spread to the pulmonary vessels. Sister has only a few days of life: she may even expire any moment."

After such verdict, Sr. Rina was asked to which convent she would like to be brought, to the Provincial House in



Nongthymmai or to Sacred Heart Convent in Mawlai ? She replied: "I think it my duty to go back to my community of Mawlai. My Sisters and my girls are expecting me there."

Her condition was so bad that it was feared that she may even collapse during her being conveyed from the hospital to the convent. For this she was asked whether she wished that a priest be called for the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick.

Sr. Rina replied that she had approached the Confessor just a week earlier and that, thanks to the mercy of God, she was not aware of any sin that should be confessed. In fact she did not even feel any apprehension or anxiety as to the present state of her soul: she felt at peace with God. As to the reception of the Anointing of the Sick, she added: "If you think that I am going to die today, then please call at once any priest. Instead if there is still time, I would prefer to receive this Sacrament from my brother, Fr. Guido." She was then taken by ambulance to Mawlai Convent.

Flowers on God's altar

Sr. Rina reached the convent at about 10.30 a.m. As she was placed on her bed, she exclamed: "This is my altar. O Lord, I offer my life for souls..." It was then that Sr. Amelia Boiani ventured to tell her: "Sr. Superior, all of us, Sisters and pupils, are praying for your quick recovery. We want to celebrate together the Feast of Mary Help of Christians on 24th May. "Surely", replied Sr. Rina, "we shall celebrate it with Her in Heaven !"

To Sr. Marykutty who tried to console her by saying she looked much better, Sr. Rina replied: "As regards my soul I should be much better. As to my body I feel there is not much hope. God's will be done!"

In the afternoon Sr. Rina felt like suffocating. So the Sisters came to change the position of the bed for more air.

One of them began to fan her, so that she may have some relief: "Please don't do that, Sister." Remarked Sr. Rina, "otherwise it may create a habit with me !"

To one of the Sisters who had come to see her and wanted to talk to her, Sr. Rina who actually could speak only with difficulty, said: "We shall meet again, Sister...in heaven. Ah ! Our Lady...Our Lady ! Tomorrow with Our Lady... in heaven !"

To another Sisters who had remarked: "Sr. Superior, you are surely happy at this moment for having done so much good to so many poor people", Sr. Rina said: "Yes, I am happy, because I have done all for God". Then to Sr. Amelia: "Are not the girls in recreation now? Don't tell them to keep silence. Let them be happy and cheerful ! Do not tell them that I am seriously ill."

In the evening she looked like being in a trance. On being asked what she was thinking about, she replied: How wonderful ! I am listening to the ringing of the bells and enjoying it !" It was during her stay at the hospital that the belfry of the Mawlai Church was completed and the bells were placed on it. Now she was listening to them. Ah ! the spell of the church-bells ! Since infancy the sound of the church-bells had played a magic spell on Sr. Rina: she would admit that, when she would feel deprived of their sound. Perhaps in those last moments the ringing bells reminded her of the salient moments in her life: the Christmas bells at her birth, the call to a new life in baptism, the thousand and one times the bells had called her to Sunday and daily Mass, the First Communion bells and the peeling bells at Confirmation day, the joyous bells during her formation years in the land of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, and now the humble but sweet bells in the

mission churches of Jowai, Tezpur, Bandel, Shillong, Dibrugarh, up to the bells of Mawlai church that were now ringing and summoning her to her last goal: the Father's home.

"As I stood watching Sr. Rina in those moments," says Sr. Marykutty, "I admired her peace and tranquility. She knew that within a few hours, those very bells would announce her death, and yet she seemed not in the least perturbed by it. Actually during my long stay with her, I always was struck by this calm and serenity in her: she seemed to have no fear of death whatsover. That innocence and simplicity which were the characteristics of all her life, were all the more evident in those last moments before death."

The same Sister continues: "At. 7.30 p.m. perceiving me present there, Sr. Rina turning to me said: 'It's time for you to be with the girls. Thank you, Sister.' Then holding my hand in hers she wished me: 'Good...Night !' It was the last wish I received from one whom I loved so much. With those words I felt she wanted to say so many things.... In that moment I was reminded of one phrase of hers, when she said: "When a Sister comes to my community, I feel she belongs to me for ever."

To the end

At night Sr. Rina's temperature rose high. She could not sleep the whole night. She kept on repeating: "My God, I offer you my life...Jesus, Jesus ...for souls..Tomorrow... with Our Lady !..."

At. 10.00 p.m. Fr. Guido arrived Sr. Rina was happy to see him, but she told him: "Now you are certainly very tired, Please go to bed now. There is time to meet tomorrow. But please

come early to 'Anoint' me. I shall be waiting for you." As agreed early in the morning Fr. Guido brought Holy Communion to her as Viaticum accomplanied by a group of Sisters of the community. You could see Sr. Rina's great longing for Jesus was very manifest in her face as she recieved Holy Communion for the last time. A few moments of fervent silent reflection followed. Then she herself asked for the Anointing of the Sick from Fr. Guido. During the liturgy of the sacrament she followed everything with full consciouness. In fact as Fr. Guido was going to anoint her hands, she requested him to do it slowly and meaningfully saying: "Anoint my hands well ! I feel I have not done enough good with them." In the meantime the chaplain of the Mawlai Community, Fr. Gervasis, arrived. He at once helped the Sisters to get ready the oxigen, because he noticed that Sr. Rina showed signs of suffocation. As the community went for the Holy Mass in the chapel, Fr. Guido celebrated the Eucharist for Sr. Rina in the room: she participated to it with touching devotion. At the elevation she gazed at Jesus with moving sentiments of love and offering. There was her complete participation with Jesus: her own Mass.

After Holy Mass Sr. Rina joined the Sisters in the recitation of the prayer of Dedication to Our Lady, Help of Christians. Then she requested Fr. Guido to recite the prayers for those in agony. Fr. Guido remonstrated saying that he could not recite those prayers yet, since she was not in agony. She smiled. Then she courtiously asked the Sisters to leave her for a while with her brother. During the conversation Fr. Guido asked her: "What shall I tell our brothers and sisters ?" She replied: "All...all...in Heaven !"

Our Lady was there

After some time she asked Fr. Guido to call the Sisters saying: "I am going to die now. Please call my Sisters". Everybody came in the room and gathered around her, some standing, some kneeling. One of them asked her: "What shall we tell Mother Provincial ?" Sr. Rina muttered: "Please thank her. Thank her and everybody very much.

Just then the Holy Mass ended at the parish church, so Fr. Attard, Fr. Dal Broi and many parishioners rushed to Sr. Rina's side. After a while Sr. Rina fixing her eyes to some particular spot exclaimed: "Our Lady !..Our Lady !" On hearing that one of the Sisters asked her: "Do you see her ?" "O no." she replied. But after some time again she exclaimed: "Our Lady!..Our Lady!.." One Sister thinking she was asking for the little statue of Our Lady that was on the table, she placed it in her hands. Sr. Rina grasped the statue with both hands, pressed it to her lips devoutly and then as if exhausted, let it fall on the bed.

Then again summoming up her strength she exclaimed: "Our Lady !..Our Lady !.." And she kept on fixing her gaze towards a definite spot. Again the Sisters asked:" Do you see her ? Do you see Our Lady ?" Sr. Rina with a sweet smile said: "O yes. I see her !....There !...."

In that moment one of the Sisters remembered a wish of Sr. Rina, that at her death the hymn to Our Lady 'Il tuo sorriso amabile' (Your sweet smile, O Mary') be sung to her. That Sister gave the picture on which the words of that hymn were written, to Sr. Pauline Guazzora, the Novice Mistress, asking her to intone the hymn to Our Lady. Nobody was in a mood to sing at that moment. So Sr. Pauline passed the

words to Fr. Guido, who pluck up courage and read slowly the words of that hymn to Our Lady, so dear to Sr. Rina. As the hymn was read, Sr. Rina seemed to enjoy every word of it. Its meaning would be:

"Your sweet smile, O Virgin Mary,
brightened the morning of my life.
May it brighten also, Mother,
my evening hour, the time of strife.
In tender years as a young child,
I prayed to you, O mother dear.
My last embrace, my sigh be yours,
O Mary, in my last moment drear,
May I then die and say: Ave Maria! Ave Maria!"

As the recitation of the hymn was ending, Sr. Rina herself pulled out the oxigen tube saying: "O let me go now !" Then raising up both arms, catching hold of the little statue of Our Lady and pressing it to her lips, she exclaimed: "Our Lady...Mamma...." After a last gasp she surrendered her spirit to God, her Creator and Saviour. It was 8.00 a.m. of Sunday, 1st May 1966. Her age was 46 years, 4 months.

A last tribute

As Sr. Rina expired a long meditative silence followed, broken only by a few peaceful sobs accompanied by loving tears. In the eyes of everybody you could read a question: "Is she really dead ?" The reply was also there "No. She passed to a new life !"

In simple, sincere words Fr. Gervasis said it for everybody else: "It has been the most edifying death I have ever seen. Our Lady had come to take her. All of us felt like envying Sr. Rina for the peace she enjoined in that moment."

As the news of her death spread in Mawlai and Shillong, an endless flow of persons—Bishop, Priests, Sisters, lay people, especially her pupils and past-pupils—passed to see her and bid her farewell in prayer. The city was both shocked by the departure of such a dear Sister and consoled by the assurance of a new helper with God in heaven.

It will be interesting to refer what one of those many persons felt in front of deceased Sr. Rina. I think that many have felt the same way, while others felt that Sr. Rina was continuing to proclaim her message of goodness to many even after death. Kong Mary Basiawmoit writes: "When Sr. Rina died I felt a sorrow that I cannot describe. Till then I often used to think why people shed such bitter tears and weep so much about the death of some person—be they friends or relatives. But that day I felt what it meant to lose a person we love. I do not know what others might have thought, but I felt that I was not even worthy to touch the body of Sr. Rina. In that deep painful sorrow, I promised Sr. Rina that I would turn a new leaf in my life. I promised her that I would do all I could to fulfil at least a part of all those things she, with so much urgency, wanted me to do."

Strange things happen

Fr. Dino arrived that evening from Calcutta, after having received an express telegram with the sad news from Fr. Guido. He had gone some days before to Shillong to see Sr. Rina during her last illness. At that time Sr. Rina on seeing him said: "Thank you. I am happy you have come. But you have come too early...Anyhow we shall see about it." Fr. Dino at first did not understand what all this talk meant. So after staying a few days in Shillong, he went back to Calcutta, because his permit to remain in Shillong had expired. It was

when he was back in Calcutta that he received the telegram of Sr. Rina's death. He would have liked to rush back, but he could not, since he had no permit to go, nor could he acquire a permit that day since it was Sunday. So he rushed to the Airport and pleaded with the Airlines officers to allow him to go to Shillong showing the telegram of the death of his sister. Nothing doing: the authorities would not issue a ticket unless he produced a permit to go to Meghalaya. "You see", pleaded Fr. Dino, "I had a permit for Meghalaya and I was there a few days ago, but since the permit had elapsed, I had to come back. Now I would like to go, it is urgent." The Airlines Officer asked him to produce the previous permit. When he saw it, it showed it to Fr. Dino saying: "But don't you see that you are allowed to go. Your permit is made for today, 1st May." Fr. Dino could not believe his eyes: it was exactly so. He bought a ticket and was just in time for the last flight of the day. On his way to Shillong he began to understand what Sr. Rina had been saying to him some days before, but he could not find a natural clue to it.

As soon as he reached Shillong he went to the Convent of Mawlai. He prayed a lot for Sr. Rina, for himself. He still thought she was telling him in the endearing term she would use with him alone: "Nerat (Blackie), and now what of you ? Well. Go ahead without fear. I am always your Rina." That meant a lot to him.

Love never dies

That very day Fr. Dino basied himself with the coffin of Sr. Rina, which he brought from Don Bosco's to Mawlai. Sr. Rina's body was then placed in the Convent's Chapel. On the following day it was brought from the Convent to Mawlai parish church for prayers and veneration. On that

day Fr. Dino was the main celebrant at the Solemn Requiem Mass, assisted by Fr. Guido and many other priests and a vast congregation of religious and people of the parish. After the Mass the body was carried in a procession of cars from Mawlai to the Provincial House at Nongthymmai. The community and people of Nongthymmai owed so much to Sr. Rina and so it was thought proper that she should be brought there too as a sign of gratitude and affection.

At about 3.30 p.m. Mother Merlo, the provincial, arrived from Bandel with Sr. Clotilde Appiano and Sr. Magdalene Caspani. Mother Provincial felt the death of Sr. Rina very much: against hope she had hoped that something would happen to keep Sr. Rina alive for the good of so many souls and the progress of the province. God wanted it otherwise. She decided that the funeral be kept on the morning of the following day, 3rd May.

Her funeral was a triumphal celebration. All the religious Institutions of Shillong with their pupils and all those who had in some way been cared for and helped by Sr. Rina or at least who had known her were in the Cathedral of Shillong for the solemn Ruqiem Mass celebrated by Fr. Guido and assisted by Fr. Dino, Fr. Fantin and others. His Lordship Bishop Stephen Ferrando, the Very Reverend Salesian Provincial, with many Salesian priests, who had come even from the far away places, where Sr. Rina had exercised her apostotate, were present at the Holy Mass. His Lordship in a very touching oration recalled the main characteristics of Sr. Rina: her love for souls and the poor, her attachment to religious life and the Founders, her love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and her dovotion to Mary, Help of Christians.

The funeral procession that followed was a devoted tribute of love and gratitude to the hard work and all-embracing service of a humble and sincere Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. It was also a solemn proclamation by the people of God of the consoling truth of a new life without end.

Sr. Rina's earthly remains were first laid by the side of the cemetery chapel. Now they rest in the beautiful crypt prepared by and for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. There they are waiting for their glorious resurrection in Christ.



Epilogue

As the friendly parting sobs stopped and the last affectionate tears were wiped off the cheeks, the dutiful prayers also were hushed into a meditative silence. The few remaining participants at the funeral procession hurried out of the grave-yard as the gates were closed to the late evening shadows.

Visibly, only the marble Angel stood holding fast to the cross over Sr. Rina's last abode on earth.

Invisibly, the Heavenly Court stood witnesses to Sr. Rina's Perennial consecration :

"God, my Father, in Baptism you have consecrated me and by your Spirit you have called me to follow Jesus

Christ more closely in order to share more deeply in his saving mission in the Church.



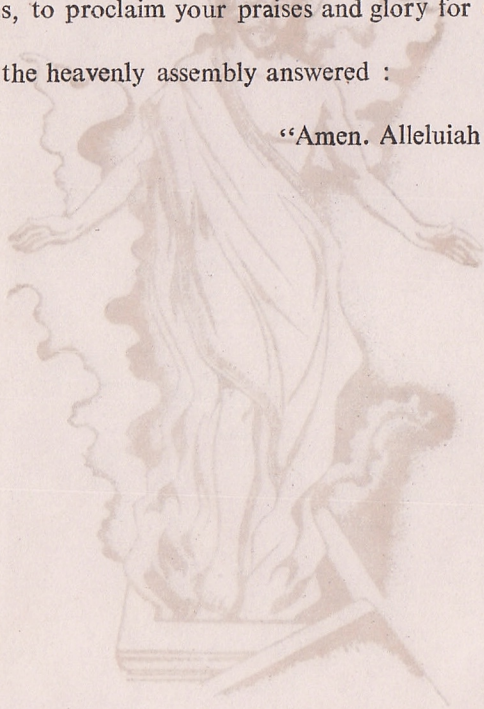
"In answer to his love I have pledged myself to live radically the beatitudes in communion with my Sisters in order to proclain Christ to the Young in the spirit of St. John Bosco and St. Mary Mazzarello.

"Before the world and Heaven, I, Sr. Rina Colussi, have freely given myself completely according to my Constitutions to you through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

"In your mercy and love may I now live in your Heavenly Kingdom together with Mary, Our Mother, and our Saints, to proclaim your praises and glory for ever."

And the heavenly assembly answered :

"Amen. Alleluiah !"



"Time passes quickly and if we do not want to find ourselves with empty hands at the hour of death, we must hasten to lay the foundation of solid virtue now. It is not words that will take us to heaven, but deeds."

"Let us make a courageous start therefore, and let us practise virtue in order to please Jesus and for no other motive. When all is said and done, most of the fuss we make is about things that exist only in our minds."

"One who truly loves Jesus gets along with everyone, and everything...

"May Jesus bless you all and make you saints. Be always of good cheer: God loves you."

Sr. Mary Mazzarello.
(From her Letters)