



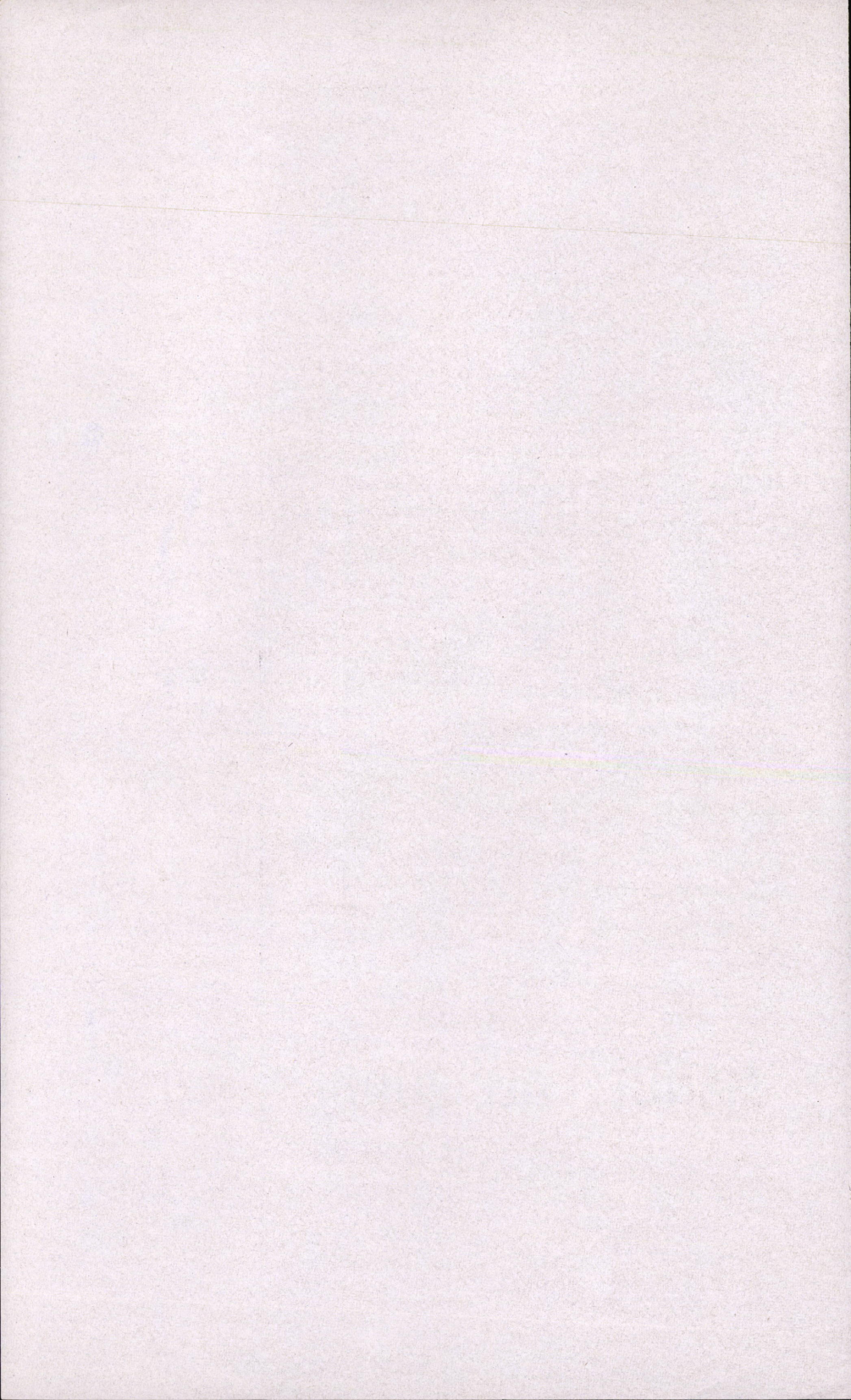
Rev. Fr.
MANUEL ALBIZURI
S. D. B.

Born :
23.9.1925

Professed :
16.8.1943

Ordained :
28.6.1953

Died :
30.9.1982



PROVINCIAL OFFICE,
GAUHATI – ASSAM.

8th December 1983.

Dear Confreres,

The task of condensing the life of a missionary of the calibre of Fr. Manuel Albizuri, into a short meaningful letter is a task that is quite difficult. The suddenness of his death left us very much perplexed at a time, when we were thinking of the Missionary life of our Province. The life of this Missionary presents itself as a beautiful saga, in which God and man prepared a new people for the message of salvation. Fr. Albizuri was one of the most impressive figures of this missionary era of the congregation of the 70's and 80's in the north eastern region. Sonapahar, the mission for which he gave so much, will always stand as a testimony of the missionary zeal of a man, who was taken up with only one idea, the spread of the message of Salvation. It is only a man of deep faith, of total sacrifice to the point of heroicity and dedication that could accomplish what he accomplished. He was a Basque, through and through, athletic, dynamic, intelligent and ever on the go. He was a man who read, and assimilated what he read, and gave it to others.

"Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air, have their nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay down his head." (Lk. 9, 58)

Fr. Manuel Albizuri was born at Azcoitia, Spain on 23rd September 1925, of a family of workers, but thoroughly Christian and religious, and living a deep life of Faith. He entered the aspirantate at Barcelona, and made his novitiate in 1942. Having finished his novitiate, he studied philosophy and after practical training, he studied theology, but his mind was continually oriented to the mission field of the congregation. He was ordained on

28th June 1953, and afterwards chose to leave for the missions of India. His first field of apostolate was in the house of Formation at Kotagiri and then Yercaud, in South India. Here he adjusted himself very well to mission life, and he in order to accustom himself to hardship, was sleeping on the ground. No sacrifice seemed too big for him, to come and work for souls. Finally he managed to achieve his dream of devoting himself to the task of spreading the work of Christ among the people of the North-Eastern Region. He was to be a touring missionary, among the people of the Himalayan region, a region that could be termed the 'miracle region', because of the vast expansion of Christianity in the region.

"Jesus began to wash His disciples feet" – Jn. 13, 5.

Coming to Shillong, he gave Himself to the service of the Church, at Marbisu, Jowai, Nongstoin, Laitumkhrah and then at Sonapahar. In these places he always showed he was a Missionary who faced the situations with great enthusiasm and was never discouraged with difficulties. In these mission centres, privation was the order of the day, and he was ready for these privations – the rain in the monsoon season – the discomfort of sleeping in any place, and even at times in a cow shed – (and he would add good humouredly, "The cow did not mind!") the discomfort of leeches, the long and arduous journeys through terrain, that can hardly be described as easy and pleasant. He knew the pangs of hunger, for he suffered from it often. He also knew what it meant to be misunderstood, but he also knew he was walking the way of the Cross, and this was a part of it. On one occasion, in order to make a sick call, he travelled the whole night through rain and wind, to reach a sick person some sixty kilometres from the mission. Fr. Albi was a born adventurer, a man without fear, deeply in love with his vocation, sustained by a living faith, and an optimism that was contagious. He was the man of faith, seeing God in the daily toil of his life, and it was this faith, that flamed-up into a torch of faith, leading others to God. He was con-

sidered by the people of Lyngam, Maram and Nongtraï, as their Father and apostle. He lived the thought of the gospel, "I am the Good Shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep" (Jn. 10, 11). In speaking to this person one got the impression of a man of enthusiasm for the Kingdom of God, buoyed up by his personal missionary vocation. In him there was no thought of fear, or of danger, and he was ready to go anywhere or to any place, when it was a matter of souls. "In his heart there was room for one thing only – souls" (Cons. 49)

When entering into a conversation with him, one got the impression that he was living the experiences he was narrating. He could take you on an elephant tour, with his gun in his hand, and you following close behind him. Looking at his face, and the hand raised like an elephant raising his trunk, you were really there on the scene. Many people take up hobbies for amusement or to spend time, but for Fr. Albi, his hunting was meant to serve, and to help his people. One got the impression that there was not even the tiniest fibre of fear in his heart. He had saved many lives, and he had helped the people, to ward off the intrusion of elephants from the villages, and thus helping the people to save their crops and even their own houses. "The heart of Jesus was filled with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd". (Mk. 6, 34)

Fr. Albi was a man, you knew as soon as you met him, he was the man of God with the poor, and he lived very close to his people. He did not stand on ceremony, but was able to adapt himself to the people and the situations in which he lived. He would correspond to the honest man of the gospel, for what he said, he did and there was no intrigue in him. "Here is an Israelite, there is nothing false in him" (Jn. 2, 47). He had a youthful optimism, which almost engulfed you as soon as you met him. Within minutes of meeting him, one could realize, here was a man who was truly in love with his work and his mission. Not for all the kingdoms of the world, would he exchange his apostolate – with his people, he was their uncrowned king, their master, doctor, father and shepherd. On one occasion he went to the bedside of a woman passing

through the throes of a painful child-birth, and in the remote villages, where medical help is unknown, he was in a predicament, but he prayed then blessed the woman, and waited in the next room for some time, and then as he himself describes it, "The child came roaring from its mother, like a shot out of a gun!..." Frugality was really a part of his life, and his palace would have been a bamboo hut, if he had to live alone. But his superiors forced him for the sake of others, to live in a decent building. He loved the jungle, and the life of nature where sophistication is unknown, and the people of the jungle were his own brothers and sisters, and we could really say about him, he had his people written on the palms of his hands – his hands were really large. For many years he lived alone, and only those who have been alone, can know the terrible depression of the lonely man. But his boys were near to him, especially the economically and culturally poor, and he made their life meaningful, for he loved them dearly. The bamboo hut was indeed dearer to him, than the affluence, if we may use the term of a concrete building. He was freed from the tyranny of comfort, for him life was giving in generous sacrifice. Even the very appearance of his jeep, gave the impression, that it went more because of the man at the wheel, than because of mechanical efficiency. The missionary vocation of Fr. Albi was influenced by his salesian and priestly vocation, and he understood with clear perception, that the future of his work, was linked with the evangelization of his boys and girls. In the three or four years that they were to remain with him, they should acquire a thoroughly Christian education, not merely an accademic training, and become 'Evangelizers' in their own villages. Fr. Albi and Fr. Premoli began the work of the Church in Pyndengrei – Nongstoin, full of zeal and for three months they worked really hard to begin the work. The plan of the two pioneers was to conquer all Lyngam people, and in the first months already ten villages enrolled themselves as Catechumens. When Fr. Albi left Pyndengrei – Nongstoin, after just one year of work, he did so with a heavy heart, but very docile to the will of God. There was no question of financial

worries in his work, but there was always this thought, these boys and girls were to be the pillars of the Church. He knew the customs and the ways of his people, and he wanted Christianity to be something belonging to the people, and to be a part of their life, and deeply linked with the customs of the people. The pupils, he cared for, depended very much on Divine Providence, but Fr. Albi was not a man, who would stand back and let Providence do everything, but he was a real worker. He had the build of a wrestler, and his strength was proverbial. With Fr. J. Premoli he was responsible for escapades that were almost unbelievable. Without a jack they were able to lift a fully loaded jeep, and put it on logs to remove the wheel. When these two missionaries were confronted with a shaky bridge they were not going to be stopped. These two men supported the bridge, while a young man drove the jeep over the bridge, with the two heavy men as the bastions underneath. When they came to a gate that was closed to them, on one of their missionary tours, and they could not find the gate-keeper, very late in the night, together they lifted the gate from the ground and put it elsewhere. No one will know the journeys and the perils that were packed into the 57 years of life of Fr. Albi, but we do know that he had a purpose in all this work. Truly we could apply the reflection of St. Paul, "For His sake, I have thrown everything away: I consider it all as mere refuse, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with Him." (Ph. 3, 9). A Professor one day asked him to give a brief summary of how he fulfilled his missionary projects. His simple but telling reply was, "I have no time for talk, I just carry on my works."

And that was his philosophy of life, he was taken up entirely with his mission, and there was no time for the unimportant. In the preparation of his 'pukri', to supply his boys with a more nourishing diet of fish, he did not get workers to do the work but he with his boys did the job. His usual garb was the man in shirt sleeves, and these were always rolled up, for he was thoroughly involved in the work. Do we not see in this attitude the Spirit of the 'Work and Temperance', left us by Don Bosco.

We often think of Fr. Albi in his capacity as a marksman. But behind the gun, there was man who had a purpose. There was a thrill in his life as a hunter, but his involvement in danger and risk was always for the set purpose of helping his people to avoid the disaster of having their crops stamped to pieces, by herds of elephants. He was a marksman of wide repute, and he was acclaimed by many as one of the most reliable hunters in the area. Even from distant villages the people would come to him asking for his help. He shot to save his people, and often to supply his boys and girls with food. Touring his mission, was by no means an easy task, for in many of these journeys, there were difficulties. On one occasion on a steep climb, he slipped during the rainy season, and fell on a rock, and as he himself reported, the rock broke and his head was slightly damaged. For those who saw the head wounds, they were really surprised that he did not feel more. He needed medical treatment, but the only medicine available, was the simple village medicine. They put the medicine on the wounds, and then covered the head with leaves from the forest. One can imagine the picture, that he presented when he arrived in the Mission centre, with such paraphernalia.

He was dearly loved by his people, and at least on two occasions, they saved his life. Once while he was touring he was suddenly taken by typhoid, and with a very high temperature and shivering all over with fever, he had to remain resting for some days. His condition did not improve, and the people seeing his condition wanted, to take him to hospital. They prepared a bamboo stretcher, and he was carried on the shoulders of his own people, the 100 kilometres to the mission. Through very thick forest, up and down the hills and valleys, at times through very steep paths. The people carried their pastor, with his 90 kgs. for three days. At times they stopped, for some little rest and to pour some cool water on the body of Fr. Albi, to give him some relief for the burning fever. At night he rested for a few hours, and very early in the morning at dawn, the stretcher bearers were ready to lift their father and carry him, to complete the journey.

Finally reaching the hospital, the Doctor shook her head, and with a smile said, "This could only be Fr. Albi, being brought in from a distant place, with fever well above normal." Usually men with slipped discs of the spine, or any spinal trouble are forced to retire from active life but in the case of Fr. Albi, he took everything in his stride and continued with the enthusiasm of a great missionary.

As we look at the life of Fr. Albizuri, we could ask, what was it that gave him so much satisfaction in his work. His life was one of intense fulfilment, for he like Caesar – 'he came, he saw and he conquered' – he conquered his people and won their hearts. The people had for him a great love, for they found in him a man only dedicated to them, living the 'Da Mihi animas coetera tolle'.

He found in his people, a simple goodness, that made them ready for the gospel, in their simple and unsophisticated life, they found meaning in the witness given to them by their pastor. Among the illiterate Fr. Albi was the only gospel that most of his people were able to read. These people had no long religious or Christian tradition or heritage, but they were deeply attached to their religious leader, for he showed remarkable qualities of concern for the poor. It was at the time that he received the "Quit Order", that the people stood by him and supported him. The people found him the genuine man of God, and they admired his human qualities, which made him seek to work for the development of the people. He was sincere and honest and his life and message had nothing 'little' about it, he was truly 'Big' – big in heart and in thinking – big for the kingdom of God.

"Father in your hands, I place my spirit" (Lk. 23, 46)

But then at an unexpected moment, God called His man, to receive the reward of his life for his heroic dedication to the service of God, and the Church, as a Salesian priest. On 28th September, he had returned from Shillong, where he had taken part in the Monthly Recollection and the Priests' Meeting, and he stayed in Nongstoin to make some last minute purchases for the mission of Sonapahar.

On the morning of September 30th 1982, he had celebrated Mass in the convent of Nongstoin, and after getting all things together, he pushed off, on what was to be his last journey. In the jeep with Fr. Albi were the Catechist and another lad from the school. As if he had some premonition of the future events, he entrusted his gun and his purse to the boy saying, "You are a good lad, take care of these. After travelling some 32 kms, with a fully loaded jeep, the fatal accident took place some 10 kms from the mission. The vehicle turned over, and due to head injuries and a crushed chest, Fr. Albi succumbed almost instantaneously. The last words of Fr. Albi, to his companions were an exhortation to pray. The boy in the jeep was stunned by the impact of the accident, but soon jumping out, he found his loving father dead – in a moment of reverence he covered his father with a cloth. He had a look at the catechist, and saw that he was more or less unharmed, then he ran – he ran with the frenzy of a boy in fear and anguish. He ran to the mission and with tears that spoke of his grief, and the sadness of a child who has lost his greatest friend. "Fr. Albi is no more!!", and sobbing bitterly, he told what had happened.

To-day as one travels to Sonapahar, on the spot near where, this valiant missionary rendered his soul to His Maker, the people have erected a monument, which speaks of the Missionary who died so tragically on the road.

After some time they managed to bring the body of Fr. Albi to the mission, where his beloved flock came to pay their tribute of love and farewell to their father and friend. The mission centre saw streams of people coming to bid Adieu, to this great pastor. The body was brought to Shillong, where the Catholic people were able to offer a fitting farewell, to one whom they loved and admired. The principal celebrant at the Requiem Mass was Mons. Hubert D'Rosario, with five other Bishops and some eighty priests. Words speak much, but the most eloquent testimonies, were the expressions of grief of the mourners who came to say their words of thanks. The expressions of grief were most touching, and the words of Fr. Albi's Catechist, steeped in deep pathos and unabated grief, spoke volumes of the love that the people had for Fr. Albi.

"Pray the owner of the harvest, that he will send out workers to gather his harvest" Mt. 9, 38.

We bow in obedience to the Holy Will of God, at the departure of Fr. Albizuri, but we ask one favour of the Lord, that he may send missionaries to carry on the work begun by Fr. Albi. There will only be one Fr. Albizuri, but we do pray that many young men and women may take inspiration from his life, and the hard rocky field that he ploughed with his labour and watered with the sweat of his brow may render a rich and beautiful harvest for God. May we ever keep in mind the legendary figure of Fr. Albizuri, who has left us, but who has left with us a beautiful example of Missionary love – intense and deeply Salesian.

The Salesian missions have been very well served in this North-Eastern Region, by zealous missionaries, and we do pray to God, that the work begun with so much love, may continue with a very fruitful apostolate.

May God inspire us to follow Christ, and carry the torch of faith to those people who are waiting for the message of salvation, is my profound wish.

Fr. Mathai Kochuparampil, S.D.B.
Provincial.

NECROLOGY :

- **Born** : 23. 9. 1925 - **Professed** : 16. 8. 1943
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