

Venerable Simon Srugi

Salesian of Nazareth

Ernesto Forti, translated by Fr. Prospero Roero SDB

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Dedication

At last here is the answer to a request made by many people to have a biography in English of Simon Srugi, the Salesian lay brother of the Holy Land, a fellow-citizen of Jesus, who was declared Venerable on 2 April 1993, fifty years after his death (27 November 1943).

It is a simple, easy and short answer, which presents one of us: "a Saint, a true friend and a man of God". Through "his daily, ordinary work, done in an extraordinary way", he advanced towards sanctity, urged on by an ardent pastoral charity and a zeal for the salvation of souls. All people without distinction were his friends: men and women, Muslims and Christians, rich and poor, old and young.

May this short biography help us to imitate him and to take him as our model, guide and protector.

Fr. Mario Murru, Provincial of the Middle East

Bethlehem 31.01.02, Feast of St. John Bosco

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Chapter 1. Something good from Nazareth

Jesus called his apostles: Peter, Andrew, Philip... They followed him. Then Philip met Nathanael and gave him the great news:

"We have found the one whom the prophets wrote about: Jesus of Nazareth!"

Nathaniel replied:

Can anything good come from Nazareth?

In answer to Nathanael's scepticism we can say that something good from Nazareth has come recently too: his name is Simaàn Srugi. To tell the truth, the Messiah was born in Bethlehem; but Simaàn - i.e. Simon - was born precisely there, at Nazareth.

A genealogy of a biblical character

Simaàn, son of Aazar, son of Tannùs, son of Faddùl, son of Girges, son of Yùssef... If you go on like that, you would arrive back in 1550, at the founder of the family, whose name was Pharaòn, living in Hauràn, the ancient district of Auranitide and modern Southern Syria.

Srugi's family comes from that very region. To follow all the course of its migration through the centuries, you should start in Lebanon, where a branch of the Pharaòn was named Srugi, to end in Palestine, at Nazareth. There the little Simaàn (Simon) was born from Aazar-es-Srugi and Dàlleh Ibrahim el Khàuali on the 15th of April 1887. He was the last of their ten children.

Obviously, as he was born at Nazareth, he became a fellow-citizen of Jesus. But his greatest blessing was to become son of God, brother and witness of Christ, through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, which he received together, according to the custom of the Greek Catholics, on the 10th of May 1877.

Simon's father was a saddler (the family name Srugi actually means "saddler" in Arabic), but soon after his marriage he opened a grocer's shop to provide for his little family. Six of his children died before they were two years of age. When little Simon was only three years old, his father too, died.

Simon was entrusted to his grandmother and grew up died on the 1st of September 1880. Five years later his mother, thin as a blade of grass, with a hint of sadness in his eyes. The noisy games in the town streets and the merry cheerfulness of his fellows couldn't efface it. That poor little boy felt a great need of love. But God, who was looking after him, had already prepared for him a tender hearted father: The "Abuliatama".

With the "Father of the orphans" in the Bread House

There were many orphans in Palestine: you had only to pass through the narrow streets of any village to notice that those poor children didn't have anybody to look after them. Father Antonio Belloni, an Italian priest of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, began to take care of them as a father, a true father, and became the "Abuliatama", that is, the father-of-orphans. Everybody called him "Abuliatama".

He devoted himself totally to the welfare of children with an unlimited confidence in God's Providence, who often helped him miraculously. More and more orphans began coming to the houses he was opening for them in Palestine. They came as migrant birds, finding on their way the relief of an oasis in an arid desert.

Don Bosco was still alive then, and the "Abuliatama" had his eyes fixed on the apostle of Turin, imitating his deeds and following his system of education founded on fatherhood. Indeed his sense of fatherhood was so keen that he wanted to found a Congregation dedicated to the Holy Family, to overwhelm with affection those who had been deprived of love since their childhood.

The Bread House

Simon Srugi, too, who was then almost 12, arrived at Bethlehem, which means the "bread house" on the 8th of December 1888. A priest of the Holy Family Congregation was passing through Nazareth. Simon's paternal aunt was afraid that her little nephew might be taken into a protestant orphanage and entrusted him to the priest as a treasure. She feared that she was no longer able to guard him.

At Bethlehem, in Don Belloni's home, Simon felt like a king. There were so many new and marvellous things to be seen in that wonderful building; but the greatest joy of all was Don Belloni himself, who seemed to be indeed an excellent example of fatherhood. To be with him meant to grow wise and good. One could learn a trade and all the skills which, at that time, were reserved for a few privileged boys.

Don Belloni's past pupils were good Christians and citizens, well prepared to face life. It was difficult indeed to leave a home where the smell of freshly baked bread mingled naturally with those of the household.

All the while, the years went by for Simon who didn't feel like leaving his benefactor. Indeed, Don Belloni himself relied on that boy, who had become one of the best. Now 16, and of fine character, so, why not prepare him to be offered to God, as Don Bosco had done with Dominic Savio?

"Later on, not now"

Don Belloni would have liked to join his family to Don Bosco's, his great model. Doing that would assure the continuity of his Congregation of the Holy Family. Would this be the time to graft the fragile shoot, which had flourished on the dry rocks of Palestine, on to the solid stump of Salesian spirituality?

In 1887, with a prophetic eye for the future, Don Bosco gave his answer to the "father-of-orphans" of Palestine: "Later on, not now". In 1890 that promise was to come true. As streams of oxygenated blood, the first Salesians arrived from Italy: Salvatore Puddu, Mario Rosin, Giacomo Mezzacasa... these men who later on would become household names. Simon Srugi in that very year decided to stay with Don Belloni, his spiritual father, and became forever a son of Don Bosco.

Chapter 2. With Don Bosco at Gamaliel's home

Great deeds must be done calmly and well. Simon Srugi's vocation too, which blossomed in the flower-bed of Bethlehem, had, still, to ripen its fruit. Simon was sent to Beit Gemal, an orphanage-agricultural school. Don Belloni had founded it where the last hills of Judea were sloping down towards the historical Shefèla plain, in typical biblical scenery.

Beit Gemal, in ancient times called Caphargamàla, probably means "Gamaliel's home". According to the tradition it belonged to Gamaliel, doctor of Law and the apostle Paul's teacher. It was there that the famous man had taken Saint Stephen's body, to give him a worthy burial.

Owing to human heedlessness, the remembrance of the famous man buried there had been lost. But a certain priest, Lucian, who was parish priest of Caphargamàla in the fifth century, had known something of that event. According to a tradition, Gamaliel appeared several times to him and gave him accurate information for finding the tomb.

So, excavations were made in the "Little Valley of the strong men" and gave the world the happy news: the body of the first martyr had been found again. The reported miracles proved the truth of the event.

But at the end of the nineteenth century nobody knew any longer with certainty that Beit Gemal had such an illustrious past. The destructive whirl of the Persian Cosroe (king from 590 to 628) and then the Muslim invasion later in the seventh century had buried with the ruins even the remembrance of the ancient grandeur. It was quite enough for Don Belloni to light on the hill of Beit Gemal a beacon of Christian light, which would shine upon the now completely Islamic area, the charm of Christian charity.

Like an ancient abbey

The house of Beit Genial was situated on the top of the hill like an ancient Benedictine abbey. It was self-sufficient with its bakery, its olive-press, its wine-cellars, its barns...

Down in the plain there were the fields to be cleared of malaria. Near the imposing building with its embattled tower were clinging the small houses of the farmers, mostly Muslims. Near the monastery they got all they needed for their living and all the benefits of a more advanced way of life.

Beit Genial had become a gathering place: all the nearby villages, more than fifty, gravitated to it. There the corn of the whole region became white meal, and the olives of all the farmers flowed into sweet-smelling oil. The mysterious leaven of charity spread around and joined all hearts into one big family.

Mild, but not at all timid

Who could have thought, on the 25th of August 1894, that just that frail boy arriving from Bethlehem to complete his preparation for Salesian life at Beit Genial, would be, for nearly 50 years, the very soul and inspiration of all that charity? Simon appeared frail, of middle height, with lively black eyes, with a piercing glance, a rather weak voice, mild and good-natured, but not at all timid. He was always kind, humorous and smiling. He used to wear a cap and a jacket buttoned at the neck. "Just seeing him you were attracted to love him."

They soon called him the "Dominic Savio" of Beit Genial and it wasn't just empty praise. His reactions in time of sorrow showed such maturity that one was inclined to say: "This young man is not like the others; he does everything to perfection."

He had understood that life was hard

On the 27th of July 1895 he was admitted to the novitiate. For Simon it was only a matter of going on, improving his dedication of self. If he sewed his fellows' clothes (at Bethlehem he had learnt the trade of tailor), he did it out of love-, if he had to fill the laundry tub by sheer force with a hand pump, he did it out of love. He used to explain to his companions: "Every turn of the wheel has to be an act of love of God."

It was his love, animated by apostolic zeal, which was the most sure sign of his spiritual maturity. Simon had discovered from the very beginning that life was a present we must make to others out of love of God; that love was the essence of Christian life.

He decided that he only had to go on speedily. That was the secret which gave him the strength to perform hard tasks: bent and silent, he carried cans of oil and thyme-essence all the day long. He thought that in silence and toil he carried his Lord's cross more easily and profitably.

"I have sold all myself to the Lord"

The role of the Salesian lay brother is one of Don Bosco's original ideas. He is a religious in civilian clothes. Legally he is of the same rank as the other clerical members of the congregation, apart from the commitments and prerogatives given at priestly ordination and from the structures of the Salesian Society.

He is a man who is ready to live fully his "kingly priesthood". as Saint Peter said of the lay people, to offer God the daily sacrifice of his life for the good of others, so that the Lord Jesus may reign in all and everybody.

He may be a mechanic, an electrotechnician, an engineer, a teacher, a cook, a farmer or a general factotum, but all that is only one of the ways in which he takes his place in his religious community and civil society. Essentially and above all lie is an apostle.

On the 31st of October 1896, Simon Srugi made his religious profession and, so, became a Salesian lay brother.

"I have given myself, I have devoted myself, I have sold all of myself to my God. Therefore I cannot be any longer either of myself or of the world." He showed he was well aware of the step he had taken by entering the religious life: a step which involves the giving of oneself to the service of the community through the practice of the evangelical counsels, confirmed by vows.

Since then, Simon's life was one of continuous dedication, without discouragement and without change of mind. Just for this reason it was free and full of joy even among the most pestering of occupations. These arrived unexpectedly one after the other, with the nature of the problems, which needed to be solved by a man of goodwill.

There he was, the first to rise in the morning, to ring the bell for the "Angelus". Then he served at Mass, guided the meditation, looked after the young in the church and in the courtyard and never failed to visit the sick in the infirmary.

Then it was time for school, which needed patience and kindness with all, without distinction between Christian and Muslim boys. Later on he used to serve in the monastery shop where the farmers, who lived far from the town, could find essential items for home and work. But there were more jobs to be done at the mill, the bakery... it seemed endless. So many hands were needed when things got busy: Srugi was ready to take his share, more willing than strong, but always animated by the irresistible power of charity.

There wasn't any minute to lose. And in fact, he seemed to lose very few. Here is what they remember of him: "Every day he carried out all these tasks marvellously, with great industry and kindness". He was well aware that to do things with a long face and to make your charity weigh on the shoulders of others was, indeed, not a very becoming way of serving God in the community.

He had a mother's heart

He made his perpetual religious profession on the 20th of September 1900. This event confirmed him in his life of self-giving and brought him the grace of doing his best with renewed energy for his neighbour's good, refining his loving oblation.

One day, towards noon, a little Muslim boy, barefoot and half-starved, had fallen into a deep sleep at his desk during the Arabic lesson. Even the bell hadn't waked him. On that day the pupils went out of the classroom on tiptoe... When he woke, he was surprised to find Simon waiting patiently nearby with a parcel of food for his dinner. That little man, of ascetic and severe appearance, had a mother's heart.

Chapter 3. "Make a note of his deeds: Srugi is a saint"

When two saints meet, they often understand and love each other at once. That happened also when Blessed Michele Rua, Don Bosco's successor visited the Salesian houses of Palestine and met Simon Srugi..

The first time, in 1895, they looked into each other's eyes a long time; but the second time, in 1908, there was a deep mutual understanding. The young Salesian opened to him the treasure of his apostolic zeal and Don Rua felt prophetically his marvellous path towards sanctity. "Follow this confrere. he said to the other Salesians. - Make a note of his deeds, day after day. He is a precious confrere: he is a true saint."

All of them were convinced of that, especially the children Brother Simon was preparing every year to the first Communion. He knew how to prepare their hearts and minds to receive Holy Communion as if touching and being touched by Jesus: an experience they would never forget in their life.

Imprisoned

In 1912 there arrived as Director, Eugenio Bianchi, one of those Salesians who had better copied in themselves the fatherly image of Don Bosco, the saint of the young. It was a real gift to the house of Beit Genial. They really needed a father who knew how to infuse confidence in God's Providence, now that the terrible 1914-1918 war was at Beit Gemal. Don approaching and sad days were near for the small Salesian community of Palestine.

Italy's joining in the conflict made heavier the already precarious situation of the community. The Salesian Sisters were sent away and the confrères of Italian nationality received the order to sail for Alexandria, Egypt. As Srugi was a Palestinian, he could stay with a few compatriots, but it was so miserable to stay alone in a sea of work, and defenceless to face the possible oppression of the Turkish government.

On the 23rd of August 1915 the Palestinian Salesians, who had remained in the house, received the peremptory order to leave, on foot and at once, for Ramleh, a little town in the plain. There they were to be imprisoned. The young, the superiors and the workers, all set out in caravan style in the summer heat. Srugi was with them. Some of them were fuming with anger and gave vent to it with swear-words against the Turks. Simon, who had accustomed himself to see everything in the light of Faith, did his best to cool them down saying: "Saint Paul was sent to prison, was beaten and ill-treated and suffered for the Lord. We too must suffer all and bear with patience, for Jesus' sake, who died for us on the cross."

When they got permission to return, they found the house ravaged and had to work hard to begin all over again.

But their trials were not over yet. Their Italian colleagues were suddenly released from prison, and they and Don Bianchi were, at last, allowed to return. It was some joy in a sea of troubles. Among these, the worst was to see the pupils seized and sent by the Turkish government to a Muslim orphanage in Jerusalem.

But, when the Allies came, all heaved a sigh of relief: at last freedom and safety had arrived.

God's image

Now inside the Salesian community uneasiness reigned: the rise of nationalism and misunderstandings had created clashes between the confrères of different nationalities and there was great danger of a deeper division. Those who were dissatisfied wanted Brother Simon to take sides with them. His moral authority would have somehow legitimised their opinions.

But that tiny little man who, to look at him, seemed too weak to stop a breath of air, proved to be incapable of compromises and gave all of them a superb lesson, seeking in all circumstances what would unite them around their superior.

Simon Srugi could see beyond the narrow human horizon: to him the superior was the living and loving image of God. To offend the superior was to be lacking in respect for God Himself. For that reason he revered him with filial tenderness. "When he passed in front of the superior's door," say the witnesses, "he used to take off his cap, as he saw in him the representative of God."

That corresponded with his constant resolve: "I will have the highest respect for the superior, because he holds God's authority. I will never give him the smallest annoyance, because he who offends the superior offends God."

To every wish of his superior, his words were: "Yes Father, at once," and he took off his cap out of respect. The performance of any order was so prompt and accurate that you needed to be careful when you spoke to him: his obedience was blind, with total commitment.

A man worth meeting

After the first world war, there began the brightest period of Simon's life, the period of full maturity. Even if he always remained in the shade, he became, at Beit Gemal, a first-rate man.

He was asked to take total responsibility for the mill, which had just got new machinery. His work at the mill placed him in the heart of the community and the surrounding people to help him to grind the flour. The farmers came with district. All needed their daily bread. And Simon needed many their grain from 50 villages in the neighbourhood. But they were glad to meet Simon himself. He was a man worth meeting.

A witness said of him: "At the mill he was a father to everybody." He had understood that in the spiritual life, what is more important is not the high class job, but the charity that must enliven it. For a religious, work too is an apostolic action. Moreover, in that region the apostolic action had to be guided by prudence and frankness: virtues which to a superficial soul could seem somewhat contradictory. But, in reality, they are not when you open yourself to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

He was a true announcer of the Gospel. Even-minded as he was, he respected the religion of those poor people, but, at the same time, through a Christian life animated by an ardent charity, he made them feel the attractive beauty of Christ.

His work in the mill

It is not easy to give a complete account of Simon's work in the mill. Every day there went up a caravan of mules and camels laden with sacks of corn. There the farmers negotiated their business, there they got the news and there they very often quarrelled. To assuage them there should have been an armed guard of policemen. Whereas to take charge of all that coming and going and all that mess it was enough to have the presence of that tiny man, with his piercing glance and his kind but firm behaviour.

He listened to and smiled at everybody. You would have said he was incapable of losing his patience. Someone was screaming because his light-fingered neighbour had stolen from his sack; others wanted amends for the insults they had received; others were pushing, claiming to pass first; others wanted to adjust the grinding as they liked. Sometimes they came to blows. Then you needed to be courageous and to enter between the rivals at the risk of getting stabbed... Srugi, who already had to mind the work, the engine, the machines, had also to be guardian, policeman and judge.

But everybody trusted him. His word brought back justice and peace. Sometimes he scolded, and strongly, but nobody got upset, because they felt that it was the reproach of a father. The flour he put in the sack, no doubt about it, was the right portion which was due. They said: "Srugi is Tamàm, the perfect man. After Allàh, there is Srugi!"

"They too are sons of God"

Srugi saw his job as a service to his brothers. It was the right interpretation of the Gospel, the most eloquent sermon, the one of actions. For that reason he mastered himself with an iron and heroic control, according to his own assistants. Never to lose one's patience in such circumstances, for many years, was marvellous indeed.

It was the result of a conquest as it is shown by his fixed intentions: "I will devote myself in the most diligent way to avoid even the slightest sin, especially that of impatience or resentment." "I will bear and suffer everything silently."

The source of that patience was love. "He did his duty for love and not against his will. You could notice that when he was called he ran at once". "To do somebody a favour was for him almost a duty, as his charity made him see God in his brothers."

Speaking of him, a farmer noted very plainly and with great simplicity: "He has been a long time in our service." He had hit the mark.

Srugi always spoke well and with the greatest respect of those rough Muslim farmers. A tenant-farmer, Mahmud Abed, testifies: "He treated with us servants very kindly". When Srugi heard a Salesian speaking rough with the farmers, he reproved him gently, reminding him of the divine likeness of all. "They too are sons of God!"

This respect conquered the souls and explains those bold expressions they used speaking of him: "He is like an angel; he is like God!"

They called him Muàllem, that is teacher. And he "Muàllem Srugi" was indeed the man for good advice. When they asked him for advice, they were sure to get the right one, given for God's sake. The Gospel seemed to shine from his soul to inspire that sluggish mass of men. It went so far that the names of Jesus and Mary were uttered by everybody, even the Muslims.

No priest would dare to go so far in such a hostile world, far from Christianity. But the humble Salesian lay brother, with the wisdom which came to him from God, succeeded in doing that too.

The preventive system is love

A Salesian not involved in work with young people is like a fish out of water. Simon Sngi, who had become Salesian to do his best for poor orphans, couldn't stay without them.

To tell the truth, with responsibility for all those works on his shoulders, it could seem difficult to live the Salesian life in all its entirety. But Simon felt himself involved, soul and body, just because of his many occupations.

In reality to animate the youth groups, to attend to sick boys and to prepare the altar-servers for the celebration of the solemn feasts, was already an active participation in the Salesian life. Thus Srugi seized every opportunity to be a first-rate Salesian.

What gives the specific character to Don Bosco's sons is their particular way of dealing with the young. In education it is commonly called the "preventive system" but it is difficult to explain in a few words. The preventive system is love and love is a mysterious thing as it partakes in the mystery of divine love and it endeavours to imitate God's tenderness.

To practise the preventive system one is asked to try to do everything in a loving way, based on supernatural values, without forcing nature, without substituting oneself for the young person, who leans naturally towards his future, and so, to help engrave in himself the marks of his own unique personality. It requires being always available to the young but without conditioning them. According to the preventive system the young sincerely wish the educator to be near them, because they feel him or her as a friend with whom it is nice to do everything together: study, recreation, work, prayer. That was the way Simon Srugi put into practice the preventive system. He had learnt it all from his thorough study of the true meaning of charity, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Taking the parents' place

A witness said that Simon Srugi "treated the boys as angels". It was the result of a continuous effort on his part, but at the same time it all appeared so natural in him that it seemed spontaneous.

It was this tender love that attached the pupils to him. In appearance he didn't show special human talents, but his eyes were quite enough to him to win confidence, as they were a faithful window of a soul in peace with God and people. The true saints are the most humane of people, capable of the most refined tenderness, as they are sensible to all the shades of love. Simon Srugi, who walked in their steps, felt that those orphans had an ever-present need of love.

Some of them had engraved indelibly on their heart the traumatic scene of their parents slain in their presence. It had happened to some Armenians coming from Turkey. Their constant movement, as well as some sudden outbursts came from a lack of comprehension by their educators, of their embittered frame of mind. "They are poor little orphans" Simon said. "We have to take the place of their parents. We must help them, correct them when they behave badly, but we must not irritate them, so that they don't feel their parents' absence and don't think of running away. We must educate them without having recourse to stick or hands or feet or harsh voice. ..."

He himself was extremely delicate. A past pupil of his, Mohammed Abu Laban, said of him: "He sharpened our

pencils. I never found anybody better than him to sharpen pencils. When he taught us calligraphy, he guided our hand with such a sweetness that not even a father could have done better".

The shadow of God's presence

His presence was a shadow of God's presence. The boys behaved towards him "with the respect which is due to the great Omnipresent". Nobody would have dared say a less proper word or do those pranks which are peculiar to the young. He was indeed the model of the Salesian, whose task is just to remind intuitively of the presence of the Father who sees all and mustn't be offended at any cost. He formed the boys according to these principles, so that, if sometimes he should have been absent, they didn't profit from his absence.

The centre which radiated this pedagogical wisdom was the church. There Simon Srugi showed the reality of the divine presence, first of all, with his prayer. By his praying he taught people to pray.

Not only that, but he taught the boys the prayers. He prepared them to serve mass, he read the spiritual reading and he regulated the tone and the rhythm of the prayer in the community. As regards the boys, one of them, many years later, said: "When Mr. Srugi passed through the playground with his absorbed air, to go to the church, the boys left the games spontaneously and followed him as chickens after the hen."

God was in the playground too

Busy with so many occupations, Simon Srugi couldn't always be in the playground. And yet, when he could, he willingly assisted in putting life into the games and knew how to keep alive the interest of the young. The Salesian is an educator in the playground, too. That's why Simon watched the pupils with a rare penetration, forming them in self-control and Christian forgiveness. He said one day to a lively little Muslim boy, Dib El Aissi: "Be humble with all, but bad with no one. If anybody beats you, forgive him and love him as a brother". As it may be seen, it was an authentic evangelical preparation. Why not speak of God in the playground too? An him we live, we move and are": it's right not to forget it even in the lightheartedness of the playground.

Besides, it is so easy to find the suitable occasions. In this, Srugi was a teacher indeed. How many times you could see him surrounded by a group of young people, busy speaking of Jesus and Mary, or telling some of Don Bosco's deeds. Nobody marvelled at that: on the contrary, it seemed such an obvious thing to do, that you would wonder if he had not done it.

Many times, during recreation, when the boys saw him passing, they interrupted the game and assailed him from everywhere. Then he directed his steps slowly towards the chapel, where the small group concentrated on God. From the playground to the church there was a constant coming and going. How could they leave Jesus alone?

Even when he went for a walk he used to speak of God, of the Holy Virgin, of Paradise, alternating the most pleasant discourses and the liveliest of games with the singing of praises and the Rosary. All that was not imposed: all the past pupils of that time bear witness to it. With Simon Srugi they used to do so and it was nice to do so_ because he was a man of lively and firm faith. He radiated God everywhere and in some ways made enjoyable His divine sweetness.

Chapter 4. "He gave medical treatment and Allàh guided his hand"

When Jesus was walking in the Holy Land. He couldn't restrain (lie feelings of His merciful heart. To see sick and suffering persons was to Him like an invitation to bring them the relief of health of soul and body.

But pain continues in the world today, too, and each Christian must have the same sentiments of Jesus, to carry out in His name the mission of comforter of human suffering. This was understood by Simon Srugi too, who from the very beginning of his religious life formed his compassionate heart on the infinite pity of the heart of Jesus.

How much distress was suffered by those poor people who came to the mill or who lived in the poor little houses round the big compound of the Salesian house! You couldn't be insensitive to their plight.

When you saw those poor people squalling in the sun waiting for their turn, worn out by festering sores or by malaria, which had made them like wandering ghosts you felt the need of doing something for them. So Muàllem Srugi, who was also the house nurse, became the good Samaritan of all the area. The oil and wine of the old parable became now ointments, pills, injections: modern medicaments; but of those time-honoured remedies you could still find the irreplaceable aroma of charity.

Srugi the Muàllem becomes Srugi the Doctor!

From the nearby villages, on fixed days, there was a winding line, like a religious procession: sick persons on foot, on camelback or on the hurrying Palestinian donkeys. As time went by, their number increased to one hundred and twenty every day. Men, women and children, dressed in every fashion, with faces distorted by pain, but with a ray of lively hope in their eyes. Then Srugi ceased being "Muàllem" and became Doctor: "Hakim". That's how they called him.

Some poor wounded people had come sporadically to that man, all charity and compassion, to be healed by him. That was enough to create round him a reputation which soon became a legend.

His knowledge of medicine was quite empirical, but he had an expert eye and rarely made a mistake. He healed by medicines. Usually he was paid by those who could afford it: a trifle; but it instilled a sense of justice and gratitude. The very natural means and gave heartily from his simple poorest rewarded him with a "Long live Jesus!" which was his favourite greeting and, when coming from a Muslim person, was a striking sign of appreciation.

When he returned home, he shook his clothes before entering the house, to shrug off the only things those poor people had in abundance and which they gave him as a present without thinking of it: fleas and other similar insects:

"In his hands the perfection of Allàh"

He was indeed a "tamàm", that is a just and perfect man. The Muslims even called him a "nabi", a prophet. Many times they didn't ask for medicines: a touch of his or a prayer was quite enough, and they went away satisfied. The patients were so numerous that a dispensary had to be built. It was enough to see Srugi's eyes when, smiling and punctual, he appeared at the door of the dispensary to conclude that he was "tamàm" and had a charm which, for many, was humanly inexplicable.

The patients came from distant places: often they had spent their meagre savings on doctors and medicines. One day a group of foreigners with a weary air were waiting at the door of the dispensary. A Salesian asked them: "Where do you come from?". - "From Gaza". Gaza is nothing less than all the day on the Mediterranean. - "From Gaza? But haven't you got doctors and medicines in your town?". - "Yes, but we have preferred to come here, because many people healed by this man spoke well of him. He is a saint and we are sure he heals well. In his hands there is the perfection of Allàh".

The patriarch of the desert

They remember, too, this event which happened on a sultry day. It is reported by sister Tersilla Ferrero, FMA, who was with him at Beit Genial for many years and was a witness to it.

Towards ten in the morning, after marching for seven hours on sultry and dusty roads, an old man, about seventy, arrived at the dispensary. The room was full. The bedouin, with a long flowing beard, speaking calmly and syllabizing like the patriarchs of the desert who do everything solemnly, said to Muàllem Srugi: "We have heard your name and we have come".

Srugi remained quiet. His eyes, usually absorbed, couldn't be taken off the sick child the old man clasped in his arms.

"This is my son!", exclaimed the unusual visitor, with oriental freedom, applying to his nephew or grand-nephew the name which expresses all his tenderness towards the sick child. "I went to all the doctors in Caifa, Jaffa and Jerusalem... and my son didn't recover. Now he is your son. Cure him!". This was said in a tone of supplication, but with full confidence.

"I don't cure anybody" the good nurse exclaimed. "It's Jesus who will cure him. Did you pray to Jesus?". And without waiting for an answer, as the speaker was a Muslim, he examined the child, gave him an injection, ordered some medicines and, at the end, turning again to the old man said to him: "You see: over the doctor, there is always Jesus who cures. And then ... there is 'Sitti Mariam', Holy Mary!" - and pointing to Our Lady's statue, - "Did you pray them?"

"But I don't know them!" the Bedouin answered. Then the old man took the child to the table of the assistant nurse, a religious sister.

"Ya sitli! (Lady!)," - he said to her, suppliant, - "Lay your hands on my son and he will be cured".

The good sister was bewildered, but Srugi encouraged her: "Don't worry, Sister, do as he asks; say the "Hail Mary" and the child will be cured".

Both of them said the "Hail Mary" together. Then the old man left. Who knows if that child was cured? With such great faith all becomes possible.

"In this little body there is an immortal soul"

The most seriously ill people, who were taken to him, used to cling to his neck, to embrace and kiss him, as if they had found a father in whom they could place an endless confidence. He let them do as they pleased. Those poor people were in great need of affection and it seemed to him he would do them wrong if he had not heartily welcomed their tenderness.

The witnesses say of him: "He was full of mercy and sweetness with everybody, especially with the children." When he cured the small innocents, he exclaimed: "So small and yet already so ill!" And sometimes he was moved to tears and exclaimed: "In this little body there is an immortal soul, destined to see God in Paradise; how good God is!"

Often those poor people were exhausted when they came. They needed food more than medicines. Simon immediately saw in their eyes the need of food and he gave it to them abundantly. His charity seasoned with a delicious taste even the bread which he gave, in such circumstances, to those poor people "sick from hunger."

For the children he kept sweets and fruit: they were his portion which he willingly gave up to make mothers and children happy, who then left blessing the man of God with the picturesque blessings peculiar to a good Muslim.

Like Job in the ashpit

Their days did not pass without their share of trials. One day a not very honest doctor, who could not stand the good done at Beit Genial and who looked for the chance to disturb, found his opportunity on the occasion of the death of a woman worn-out by gangrene. Simon had sent her away as incurable and the doctor stirred up a violent campaign against the dispensary and Simon himself.

All were worried; he was the only one keeping calm and serene. God would take care of him. And God really did. That offensive action ended soon through the direct intervention of the English High Commissioner for Palestine, who knew the man of God and honoured him with his protection.

In the meantime Simon continued quietly and impassively with his work. There was a very poor young fellow from Yemen, who was also very sick. He continued to work as long as he was able, but, in the end, he was struck down by illness. He was like Job in the . abandoned by everybody. By all, that is, except Simon, the good Samaritan, who hastened to track him down and took him home and cured him through time. Then he employed him as a servant and did not abandoned him till lie recovered thoroughly. To complete the work of mercy, he asked the bursar of the Salesian house to engage him as a shepherd.

Srugi was attentive to every care, often at great sacrifice to himself. The Rector often found him, late at night, in the dispensary still preparing medicines for his patients. To the mild reproaches of the Rector, he humbly replied: "Oh, Father! Many patients will come from a distant village and we must cure them and send them home before the day is over, if we do not want to keep them here at night too!"

This was just what he did on several occasions when the patient's state and the late hour made it unwise to send him or her away. Then he supplied all the necessities, the bed, the food, and above all a great love, which maybe the poor fellow had never felt in his life. Even at night he could not stay quiet:every now and then there were dying people who did not want to die alone and who wanted to have Srugi near them.

The desperate cases

Sister Tersilla remembers how lie reacted to receiving patient so seriously ill that he enjoined tire relatives to take him urgently to the hospital, but they absolutely refused. Faced many desperate cases. On one such day they took to him a with such obstinacy, Srugi gave them some simple medicines and prescribed: "Pray to Sitti Miriam." Two days later, Srugi, raising his eyes from work, found the patient quite recovered, standing in front of him. He addressed him, as he used to do: "I have only given you the medicines. It is Jesus who healed you."

But several times, in other cases, when the illness appeared incurable, with deep-felt words of faith he knew how to make death's mystery less gloomy and more acceptable with faith in God.

Chapter 5. The "little way" which took him so far

The "little way" is the main road to holiness. You go on it. It is the way followed by the saints. And it is so with all humility, but very far almost without 'simple that it mingles with everyday life. But it is permeated by such a great heroism that when you think of it, you are filled with amazement.

It is a question of living the "current moment" in perfect faithfulness, abandoning oneself totally into the Father's hands, without any ambition of doing great deeds. It is a question of making the most of all occasions, even the smallest, with a joyful heart, living them as an unconditional offering of oneself, overflowing with love.

Simon Srugi had understood it and enlivened his spiritual life with these solid principles. He had written carefully in his note-book: "The works of the religious, however small and simple they may be, are precious and welcome to God, when we do them to please Him." It was the secret of all his life.

In his secret little note-book he had also written: "To love God means not to give Him the least displeasure either in thoughts or words or actions, but to love Him very much, as he has loved me so much." And in another note he wrote: "To empty oneself of every thought, wish or news from the world, to be only with God now and for ever."

So, he was empty of himself and was filled with God. You could perceive it from the brightness and serenity of his face. That was the very reason why he was well-liked by everybody. "He did everything in such a simple way, even when he gave a sweet or said an amiable word to the boys, that all seemed in him to be spontaneous and very easy."

How he gave up his turns to go to Turin

As a good Salesian, Srugi had a keen wish to visit places where Don Bosco had lived and to pray before the altar in the church of Mary Help of Christians. The superiors several times had given him the occasion to go. At last in 1929 he welcomed the invitation with simplicity. It was a special occasion: Don Bosco's beatification. But as there was in the house an older confrère who, according to Simon's opinion, was worthier to assist at the beatification, he gently gave up the journey on his behalf.

A second time all was ready for the departure, even the passport, but the good nurse had not the heart to leave without assistance his Rector, who had recently fallen ill. And so Srugi never went to Turin. But he took comfort saying: "I shall go and see Our Lady in Paradise" and continued his work of good Samaritan, peacefully as ever.

The charm of the "Little Flowers"

His simple and serene vision of life, like a Franciscan's, Flowers." Nathanael's question in the Gospel: "Can anything good come flourished in episodes which have the charm of "Little Nazareth really nothing good came and that nothing was me."

Every now and then somebody reminded him jokingly of About 1933 a terrible drought scourged Palestine. The ground was parched. Without water in the tanks and without from Nazareth?" His serious answer was: That is right, from flour in the cupboard, one could not live. The Rector, passing through the dispensary, complained to the good brother and recommended him to pray the divine Providence. Srugi said to Sister Tersilla: "Have you seen, Sister, how sorrowful our Superior is? Let us offer God everything we do today, to draw upon ourselves God's mercy and His providence."

Today the meteorologists would surely give other explanations, but the fact is that the following day the cataracts of the sky opened. The ground enjoyed the precious moisture and the tanks were soon overflowing. Then the dew completed the work of the rain and that year, contrary to every expectation, was really the year they enjoyed the great providence of God.

Quite properly he saw God's hand everywhere. "How good Providence is!" he said one day full of joy, entering the dispensary. "A little horse has been born and is already standing on its feet!"

One day the ants in the dispensary assaulted the sugar-bowl and the box of laxative chocolates Sister Tersilla was visibly disappointed at the unfortunate discovery Simon on the contrary exclaimed "Oh! God's creatures! I How nice you are!" Then he took the part of the small animals against those who wanted to have recourse to destructive means. "We must not make them die; they are God's creatures. Rather give them something to eat. Put some sugar along the wall." And following the thread of his unpredictable Franciscan thoughts, he added: "Unfortunately, unwillingly sometimes we crush some of them."

A Muslim peasant hit the mark when he gave this happy description of Muàllem Srugi: "He was a very sympathetic man, very merciful: he felt sympathetic towards humans, animals and all creatures."

"God lives in my soul"

Simon Srugi's heart was burning as the lamp before the tabernacle in the church. He lived in the presence of his God in an act of continuous offering and unceasing adoration, even when his work was most demanding. He wrote in his little note-book: "God lives in my soul, blazing with light and glory not less than in the glory of Paradise. I am always in God's presence; I am part of His guard of honour."

If his community was gathered in the chapel, even in the midst of extra heavy work in the mill or in the bakery, he was spiritually united to their prayer, convinced as he was that "charity takes the place of the practices of piety." "I leave God to serve God", he used to say smiling, when he had to leave the common prayer to be with the boys or in the mill with the quarrelsome peasants, or among the patients in the dispensary.

"Jesus is suffering in the sick," he used to say and he endeavoured to do for them all he would have done if he had been with Mary and John under the cross of Jesus. On Friday he felt the Passion of Jesus: on that day he was more quiet than usual. He always had Jesus before his eyes: he accompanied Him before the Sanhedrin along the "Sorrowful Road" to Calvary... And he saw Him in the suffering poor who silently passed by before him, one by one.

But when Saturday arrived, the day devoted to Our Lady, he brightened up with joy, exclaiming: "It is marvelous to have Mary as our Mother."

In raptures about heavenly things, he almost forgot he was still on earth. But to remind him there soon came the days of war, and of blood and of the need for forgiveness.

Chapter 6. The days of war and blood and forgiveness

It seems that Palestine has never had peace. When the long Ottoman domination ended in 1917, another very sad experience was to begin under the British mandate. In that same year there was "Lord Balfour's Declaration" which proposed Palestine as a centre of gathering for the Jewish people. Surely the Arabs could not accept it, as they had just begun to taste freedom and had felt an intense national spirit just reviving.

To begin with, the Jews looking for a fatherland were arriving a few at a time, but then from year to year they became more and more numerous, some of them authorized and others illegally. Beginning from 1936 the Palestinians had opposed them with guerilla attacks. The nationalists sabotaged the British sporadically and then disappeared into the hills. Curfew, martial law and terror were everywhere.

The rebels, forced to live as outlaws, sought refuge on the mountains and Beit Gemal became a dangerous transit place. Sometimes the guerillas stopped to ask for food. Sometimes they brought the wounded and Srugi treated them.

A salute for Muàllem

In 1937 the Salesian community installed a telephone and that had tragic consequences: the guerillas thought it was intended for informing the police. Some time later round there, a leading rebel was captured and executed: it was the Salesians' fault! In June 1938 the guerillas rushed into the house, gathered the confreres, got hold of the Rector, Don Rosin and ordered him to deliver one hundred pounds, an enormous sum at that time. They searched everywhere but managed to put together only some small change and a few things they could use. Disappointed, they beat Don Rosin till blood flowed.

At that point Srugi arrived. He was carrying on his arm Sunday clothes to give them to the guerrillas. The head looked him in the face and recognized him: it was the Tamàm! He came to attention and said imperiously: "Young men! This is Muàllem Srugi. Salute him, out of respect!"

Then they left, taking with them what could be useful, but did not do any more harm to anybody.

We must always do good

Absurd accusations were made against Don Rosin by the rebels. Some days later he set out on horseback to Rafat, where he was awaited by a community of Sisters. In the evening the horse returned home alone. The following day the police found the corpse of Don Rosin buried under a heap of stones. The guerrillas had waited for him on his way back, in the middle of a maize field, and had stoned him to death. When they removed the stones, Don Rosin appeared with his hands crossed on his breast and scraps of a rosary-beads twined between his fingers.

It was a Friday, the day of the Passion, and Srugi crossed on his breast and scraps of a rosary-beads twined savoured all the bitterness of that grief. Prudence suggested to close the dispensary at least for some days, but Srugi did not want to let his poor suffer only from human considerations.

The following day there was the usual crowd in the dispensary. Suddenly there came some young Palestinians with rough manners. Sister Tersilla gave Srugi a hint: "Maybe they are the murderers,,," - "Forget it. Sister!", was his reply. "Forget it? They killed our Rector!" she answered.

The young fellows entered, shouldering their way in and in the rush they threw Srugi to the ground. Sister Tersilla helped him up and scolded them. Srugi kindly said to her: Our Lord said: "Father, forgive them. as they do not know what they are doing". And he treated those ill-mannered people like all the others.

Eight days later a guerilla arrived again. In a fight with the police he had a gunshot wound. He was terrorized and hunted down. Sister Teresilla arrived panting and whispered in Srugi's ear. "The British are coming! They are in the courtyard"! Srugi continued the dressing and Sister Teresilla insisted: "Why do we not use the chance to give him over to the police"? "Why should we do any harm?" Srugi replied. "We must always do good. If he did any harm, let him see about it with God. But we must always do good".

Then he said to the guerilla: "Listen, the British are here. Go this way" and showed him the door to the back, adding, "The Lord be with you".

Sister Teresilla gazed at him dismayed. Srugi added in a low voice: "This is the head. Surely he will be killed, because they are searching for him. Let him see about it with God, but we must always do good".

Sister Teresilla was elected Superior of the small community of Sisters. When Srugi returned from the dispensary, he said to her: "Mother Superior, you represent Our Lady. You are the representative of God".

Chapter 7. "His head was full of God"

On the tenth June Italy went to war and the following day the Italian Salesians were arrested. Srugi too was arrested for some days, then, as he was not Italian, he was released. He returned home and had much more work to do, as the community had been decimated. But his strength, consumed so generously for others, was waning...

He had already received the first announcement of the approach of his Calvary in 1939. In that year a fit of malaria and double pneumonia took him to death's door. He had to be taken to the French hospital in Bethlehem, where he filled everybody with wonder for his perfect resignation. It seemed that, when he suffered, his joy grew more obvious. An Arab assistant of his said of him: "His head was always full of Paradise. He only thought of Heaven and that thought made even "sister death" quite welcome. For Simon, death seemed, above all, to be a meeting with his Jesus. He almost got excited when he thought of it. Then, coming back to his senses, he concluded quietly and with theological preciseness: "Paradise is God."

He recovered and went back home, but he turned his reflection more and more to the Crucifix of Christ. "The Crucifix must be your favourite book" he wrote in his "Thoughts." And again: "The science of love is not learned in books: it is given only to those who look at the Crucifix and speak to Him, heart to heart."

Patients still wanted him

He had returned from hospital, but he had difficulty in recovering his strength. He had other relapses. On the fifth of May he could not get up. As the illness seemed rather serious, he was taken again to the hospital. He recovered again, but he was so exhausted that he could hardly go upstairs.

And yet he did his best to make himself useful in the infirmary and in the dispensary where the patients were always numerous.

Patients still wanted him even if in the neighbouring villages there were by then, doctors and pharmacies. Muàllem Srugi treated them with faith and for God's sake, and that, in the opinion of his poor, counted much more than all the medicines in the world.

Towards the end of 1943 the good lay-brother's weakness was extreme. He was sent to the House at Cremisan, near Bethlehem, so that he could recover his strength again. He was so exhausted that, going upstairs, he had to stop and sit down half way, with his head between his hands, to catch breath.

But even if his strength was waning, his spirit was ever lively and agile..

Jesus suffered thirst

During the first days of October he returned to Beit Gemal, but he could not leave his little room any longer, which had been the scene of so many conversations with God.

Asthma and a persistent cough changed his day into a continuous martyrdom. One day after a violent bout, he could not help saying: "It is terrible when you cannot breathe!" But then, almost regretfully, he added: "No, no! It is the Lord's will, it is all right".

One of the last days he sent for the Rector and asked him to bring some ice. They told him that, soon after lunch, it would be brought. Hardly had the confreres left the dining-room than he, regretfully, sent again for the Rector and said to him painfully, "Do not bring the ice any longer". And then, looking at Christ's Crucifix, he added: "Jesus on the Cross suffered thirst. I want to imitate him".

On 26 November he almost could not speak any longer. Night arrived. The nurse watched over him for a long time then, seeing him quiet, retired. When he returned towards 2 am, he found him immersed in a placid sleep, with his hands crossed on his breast. Forever.

"It is a pity he was a Christian"

The first who ran for the last farewell to Muàllem Srugi were the Muslim peasants. Though some were dirty, infested, quarrelsome, they all had tears in their eyes.

Everybody had his remembrance. "He was a sea of charity. He suffered vwhen lie saw us suffering. He was glad when he saw us glad. He vvas a man faithful to his religion and respected others. He cured the people and Allah guided his hand. Although a more skilled doctor came, nobody would cure us better than he did. He was like a cup of honey. In his hand there was the perfection of Allàh. Allah guided his hand. He had his head full of Paradise. After Allàh, there was Srugi."

Those Muslim peasants, marvellous in their oriental exaggerations, loaded Srugi's coffin on their shoulders and took him in turn to the cemetery.

There were official and eloquent tributes, but they were soon forgotten. On the other hand they remember the short, unofficial words of a Muslim who, backhome, shook his head and said: "It is a pity Muàllem Srugi was a Christian. If he were a Muslim, we would make him one of our holy men".

The Catholic Church agrees and in 1993, Pope John Paul II declared Srugi "Venerable".

Appendix A. SIMON SRUGI YEAR AFTER YEAR

Simon Srugi, Salesian Lay-Brother, Servant of God.

1877. He was born on the 15th of April, at Nazareth, fellow-citizen of Jesus.

His parents were Aazar Fl Srugi, a saddler by profession (the word Srugi means "saddler"), and Dalleh Ibrahim El Khàuali, both Greek Catholics. They came from Lebanon and had ten children. Six of them died before they were two years of age. Simon was the last of all.

1882. At six years of age, he was left an orphan by his father and mother and was brought up by his grandmother.

1888. In December, at the age of twelve, he was received into the orphanage of Bethlehem, directed by Canon Antonio Belloni, the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Family. He completed his primary education and was trained as a tailor.

1891. Canon Belloni with his Congregation and all its houses joined the Salesian Congregation and so it was that Simon met the first Salesians.

1894. Simon was sent to Beit Gemal as a Salesian aspirant and completed his school education. There, in 1895, he started his Novitiate and in 1896 he became a Salesian. He did not leave Beit Gemal any more till his death.

His activity. He was "a teacher, an assistant, a door-keeper, in charge of a small shop of food and knickknack, and above all a nurse". As the head of the dispensary, he attracted the sick people from the fifty nearby villages. The patients came to meet "him" more than the "doctor". His mill was the only one within a range of thirty kilometres; the peasants ran to him from everywhere and put their trust in him blindly. "After Allah there was Srugi", as the Muslims used to say.

1915. Owing to the war, the house of Beit Genial was requisitioned for some time by the Turkish soldiers. Simon and the other Salesians were compelled to leave: when they returned, they found the house plundered.

1938. The Salesian house found itself in the middle of guerrilla activities: the Rector was killed and only Srugi's intervention prevented more serious consequences.

1940. The war broke out again and Srugi was arrested for some days.

1943. He died at Beit Gemal on the 27th of November at the age of 67. One of the Muslim elders commented: "It is a pity he was a Christian. If he had been a Muslim, we would have made him one of our holy men."

1966. On the 28th of November he was declared Servant of God.

1993. On the 2nd of April he was declared Venerable by the Pope John Paul the second.

Appendix B. Palestine year after year

Palestine, the Jews' promised land, was occupied by the Arabs in 637 A.D. When Srugi was born, it had belonged for centuries to the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire.

1897. In Europe the "Zionist Movement" starts with the intention of making Palestine the "Hebrews' motherland- for the Jews of all the world. And so began the return of the Jews.

1914. Turkey enters war on the side of Austria and Germany.

1917. Palestine is occupied by the British troops.

1923. Great Britain obtains mandatory rights over Palestine. The immigration of the Jews increases.

1936. The beginning of the Arab revolt against the British Administration and of the civil war between Arabs and Jews. Even with the military intervention, attempts to divide Palestine into two states fails owing to the intransigence of the Arab and Jewish communities.

1939-'45. During the war the Jewish presence increases.

1948. The British mandate ends and the independent state of Israel is born.