

SERVANT OF GOD FELICE TANTARDINI (1898-1991)

The Servant of God, Brother Felice Tantardini, a lay missionary of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) in Burma (Myanmar), was born on June 28, 1898 in Introbio, a small village north of Milan, in the Italian province of Lecco. He was the sixth of eight children. As a soldier in World War I, he was taken prisoner by the Austro-Hungarians and later escaped from a prison camp. He entered the PIME in 1921, and in 1922 was sent to Burma where he remained until his death on March 23, 1991. He would return to his native land only once, in April 1956, but returned to Burma in January the very next year. His earthly story does not include any particularly sensational events. What is striking and arouses admiration is “the extraordinary in the ordinary” in this man, rich in humanity and overflowing with faith; someone who made his life a total gift in the service to the Gospel and to his brothers and sisters.

The first virtue that stands out from the overall picture of his life is faith. The criteria that inspired his words, his writings, his actions, and his relationships with people were derived, not from calculation or human logic, but from the Gospel. His gaze was one of faith. We can truly say that he saw and judged things, events, and people with the eyes and the heart of Jesus, whom he loved deeply. In his journey of faith, he let himself be “formed” docilely by an exceptional educator – his “dear Madonna,” whom he invariably invoked with affection and filial tenderness. Brother Felice’s faith was constantly nourished by the Word of God, prayer, and the Sacraments, from which he would draw light and strength to face every challenge and trial, with a smile on his face and peace in his heart,

never complaining about his hardships. We know this from excerpts of testimonies taken during official depositions for his beatification cause:

“He had a pure and simple faith. God and Our Lady were his everything.” “Every morning he had at least an hour of meditation and then he rang the bell. And this he did every morning, without ever getting tired.... He was also faithful to Eucharistic adoration, which he would engage in especially in the evening, after work.” “When he prayed, he was truly attentive.... He seemed to be talking to God as if he saw him.” “His devotion to the Madonna was proverbial: he was always holding the rosary.”

To understand how and with what spirit he worked, the following two testimonies are particularly relevant.

A Burmese nun declares, “He was a man full of virtues, completely dedicated to his work.... And he never wasted time. He was a man who was all about prayer and work, and his work was all for God.... He preferred to do the work in silence and in secret.... It was a way of being attentive and totally dedicated to God and his service.”

A Burmese priest attests, “I remember him as a man who worked a lot, who was enthusiastic about his work and was able to inspire those who worked with him. I remember that he was very careful not to require of someone a more difficult or demanding job than one he could do.... He was always very serene and joking, so he made us all happy and satisfied in our work.” In a word, Brother Felice loved to work joyfully for the Lord. He knew how to teach others about work, which means about life. After all, life is not worth living without a task to accomplish!

“Faith work[s] through love,” says St. Paul (Gal 5:6). It was from his love of God that Brother Felice’s love flowed towards everyone; a love that was manifested concretely in his attentive service to others, especially those most in need: the sick and those suffering from Hansen’s disease and other disabilities, without making distinctions of the creed that one professed.

Self-giving was also expressed in the obedience he practiced in an exemplary way. He happily went everywhere that the bishop or his superiors sent him, and he was particularly happy to have been sent to help the forest dwellers. He said that people in the city enjoyed a certain well-being and had workers at their disposal, while those in the forest were often abandoned and in need of everything. He willingly, but discreetly and hidden from others, stripped himself of everything to help the poor, keeping for himself only the bare necessities. He was well liked by everyone but remained humble and even a bit shy. In fact, humility seemed to be part of his very nature.

The spirit of sacrifice and the ability to face the difficulties, trials, and adversities of life with patience and courage are part of Tantardini's rich human and Christian heritage. We know that he did not grow up in comfort and spent years of military service and imprisonment during the Great War, which tempered young Felice's character. This was followed by his missionary experience in a land and a time marked by misery, hunger, conflict, famine and Japanese and Chinese invasions and bombings during the Second World War; all of which brought unspeakable sorrow and suffering. We also know that he risked his life in the midst of the bombings during the Japanese invasion, which lasted two years. But he always managed to get by with the special protection of the "good God" and the "dear Madonna," as he said. His own ingenuity also certainly played a role in all of this.

But time passes for everyone. His physical health had taken its toll from his work, many an exhausting journey and even some surgical interventions that resulted in postoperative complications. Nevertheless, it was rare for him to complain, always careful not to burden others. Sustaining him through all the tribulations were his rock-like faith and his fidelity to prayer. He could not have been able to cope with so many trials without strong internal motivation and special help from Above, which he sought assiduously with humility and trust.

He died at the age of 93, on a mission that had not yet been completed. It was Saturday, March 23, 1991, Mary's day, just as he had desired. He is, no doubt fulfilling his promise from heaven to be a missionary, but now "no longer beating the anvil, but hammering steadily at the heart of the good God" for the salvation of those poor and humble people he so loved.

