

A brief history of Blessed Artemide Zatti

(with more anecdotes)

Artemide Zatti was born in Boretto, East Reggio (Italy) 12 October 1880. He was soon to learn what sacrifice was, for at nine years of age he was already a day-labourer. The Zatti family was in dire straits and emigrated to Argentina early in 1897, settling in Bahia Blanca. Artemide was 17 years old.

Young Artemide immediately began working in an inn, and then in a brick factory. It was here that he frequented the parish church that was in the charge of the Salesians. The Bahia Blanca parish priest was Fr Carlo Cavalli, a man of piety and remarkable kindness. Artemide was pleased to have him as his spiritual director, and the priest found the young man an excellent collaborator.

The young man was soon attracted to the Salesian way of life; and at 20 years of age entered the aspirantate at Bernal. These years proved trying for Artemide, for he was older than his companions but well behind them in studies. However, he overcame his problems, thanks to his determination, his keen intelligence and his solid piety.

He showed no shadow of inhibition when he had to sit in class together with lads of 11-14 years of age. He made himself available for all tasks he was faced with, even the many awkward and arduous duties that he was asked to undertake, for the Superiors considered him a veritable factotum on account of his age and skills.

In his caring for a young priest suffering from tuberculosis, Artemide himself unfortunately contracted the disease. Through the fatherly interest and influence of Fr Cavalli (who followed his progress from his far-off parish) Artemide was moved to the Salesian house in Viedma. Here the climate was more suitable and there was a missionary hospital run by a skilful Salesian infirmarian, Fr Evasio Garrone, who was responsible for the medical attention of the patients.

Fr Garrone was advancing in years and was not his former active and healthy self; and he was not slow to realise two things: the serious illness of Artemide and his truly virtuous character. He considered that the young Brother would be most suitable to succeed him and take over the ad-

ministration of the hospital. He suggested to Artemide to pray to Mary Help of Christians to restore him to health, and to promise that his cure would be taken as a sign that he should dedicate himself for life to the sick inmates of the hospital. Artemide willingly agreed to do this; and remarkably regained his health. To quote his own words: "I believed; I promised; I was cured". His future life was crystal clear to him, and he accepted it enthusiastically.

Artemide humbly accepted the disappointment in renouncing his opportunity to be ordained a priest (because of the promise made during his illness). At no time was he ever heard to express regret at the loss of this great privilege. Whenever he spoke of it, there was never any sign of the slightest resentment.

He made his first profession as a Salesian on 11 January 1908, and took his perpetual vows 8 February 1911. In keeping with the promise he made to Our Lady, he immediately gave his total life to the hospital patients. He had received his certificate of pharmaceutical competency, and later, when Fr Garrone died in 1913, took on the total responsibility of the hospital. He was appointed vice-director, administrator, and pharmacist. He enjoyed the deepest respect of the patients and also of the health authorities (who continued to grant him ever-greater freedom of action).

His whole life was devoted to the hospital; day after day he laboured there with a dedication nothing short of heroism. He was up and about at

4.30 a.m.; meditation and Mass; a visit to every department. Then he cycled (his bicycle became a local legend) to do the rounds of assisting the sick in various parts of the city. After lunch, from four o'clock to six, he again visited the patients both in and out of the hospital. He then spent up to 8 p.m. in the pharmacy, and made a further check through the wards. Finally (up to 11 p.m.), study and spiritual reading. At last it was bed-time . but, always available for emergency calls.

His labours obviously extended well beyond the hospital, indeed throughout the city and as far as the two suburbs on the banks of the River Negro: Viedma and Patagones. He was presented with a car, but soon sold it in the interests of his vow of poverty, and also because the bicycle 'made it easier for him to meet people'.

He always did his rounds in a white coat and carried a bag of the more common medicines . one hand on the handlebar and rosary beads on the other. He favoured the poorer people, but was also sought by the well to do. He was 'on call' at any hour of the day or night, and in all weather conditions. His journeys often took him to the slums on the confines of the city. There was no question of payment; any offerings made to him ended up for the needs of the hospital.

Whenever he heard the remark at the hospital that a certain medicine was too expensive, his immediate reply was, "No, no! Divine Providence is rich and will provide for everything we need".

His reputation for caring for the sick spread throughout the southern districts, and sick people came to him from all parts of Patagonia. It was not unusual for the sick to prefer a visit from the 'saintly infirmarian' rather than from a doctor.

The Venerable Artemide Zatti loved those under his care in a most touching manner. He saw Jesus himself in them, and used to ask the Sisters for linen articles or a garment for a patient, saying, "Would you please let me have a coat for an elderly Jesus", or "Have you clothing for a 12-year-old Jesus". (Summ., p.45, § 170)

At one time the Superiors thought of accepting only 70 patients at the hospital. Our good Salesian Brother remarked to one of his confreres: "What would happen if the seventy-first sick person was Jesus himself, and needing our help? Would we have to tell him there was no spare bed for him?"

His caring sympathy for the sick manifested itself in most pleasant ways. An observer once remarked that he was seen personally carrying to the morgue the body of a patient who had died during the night. He did not want the other patients to awake and be upset by the sight of their deceased companion. Artemide was reciting the *De profundis* on his sad journey. (cf. Inform., p. 235)

He always treated the doctors and the managerial staff with great respect, even when difficult situations occasionally arose and legalistic officialdom was at odds with the practical experience of the 'man actually on the

job'. Artemide's serene attitude was able to get round these problems and find suitable solutions.

As a true and faithful Salesian, our good Brother was most faithful to the motto Don Bosco had left for his followers: Work and Temperance. His activity was truly astounding, his willingness habitual, his sacrificing work, especially in the dead of night, ever available; he was indifferent to personal comforts; he never sought holidays or reprieves.

The remark was often heard that his only five days of rest were those spent in prison! Yes, he had actually been in jail because of a prisoner who had escaped whilst being cared for in the hospital. In an unbelievable show of bigotry our Venerable Brother was blamed for the breakout! He was unconditionally pardoned and his return home proved a veritable triumph.

Only a profound interior control made it possible for Artemide to cope with the problems and difficulties arising from unexpected demands made on him, and the irregular upsets in his timetable. Despite all, his devotion to religious 'common-life' was most edifying. It was a source of wonder to all how this saintly religious, so constantly busy with innumerable hospital responsibilities, could be such a model of regularity in the life of the community. Not only was he the bell-ringer; he was also regularly the first arrival for all community gatherings.

As a good Salesian, he knew how to make happiness a component of his

holiness. As St Dominic Savio used to say (in his understanding of Don Bosco's teaching), "Here we make holiness consist in being happy". Artemide, too, used to "season his charity with a serene and attractive joy", as is written in the *Summarium*, p.41, §150.

His kind smile never left him. This is noticeable in the few photos we have of him. He was easy to get along with, always pleasant, cheerful and pleased to be among ordinary folk. And he was above all a man of God. He radiated goodness.

One of the hospital doctors said of him, "When I met Brother Zatti, any doubts I had disappeared". Another one remarked, "Brother Zatti brought me belief and faith in God".

When Father Peter Berruti, a most saintly member of the Salesian Superior Council, made an official visit to Patagonia he expressed amazement in his official report regarding the hospital and its management: "This hospi-

tal is truly a miracle of Providence... Brother Zatti is a man sent by God... The hospital is a prodigy of God's care; I cannot understand how it can actually carry on". (*Inform.* p.226)

In 1950 Artemide fell from a ladder and during treatment for this accident it was discovered that he had a cancerous tumour. He continued, however, to attend to his mission in life for a further 12 months, until the suffering he heroically endured forced him to retire on 15 March 1951, fully aware of his condition. He was flooded with affection and gratitude by a population who from then on began to beg him to intercede for them when they prayed for help from God.

A record number of people from Viedma and Patagones attended his funeral, and the fame of his holiness spread rapidly. His tomb became a haven of veneration. Whenever people visited the cemetery for any funeral, it was customary to pay their respects also at Artemide's grave.