Unforgettable Brother M. G. Shannon at St. Edmund’s, Shillong

A few glimpses of a dedicated, lovable and an exemplary teacher

Dr. A.S. Guha*

Once upon a time, as early as the 1950s, two most well-known centres of education were St. Edmund’s and St. Anthony’s College. If we throw a glance at the list of prominent persons of the region, we will find that many of them were students either of Edmund’s or Anthony’s. These two names were the hallowed names. They are still well-known institutions, well-known and well-managed. However, with the advent of independence to India, rapid progress has taken place in the North-eastern region in the field of education. States like Nagaland have made distinct mark in the field of higher education. In fact, a most remarkable feature of present day Nagaland is the growth of higher education within a short span of a few years.

The author of this article, Dr. A.S. Guha is one of those prominent persons who were students of St. Edmund’s College. Dr. Guha is one of the acclaimed poets in the field of English poetry. He is also a senior functionary of the well-known open university, IGNOU. He holds the charge of an important unit of IGNOU in the North-east. As he points out in his article below, his entire education took place at St. Edmund’s. He was a student, and later on also a teacher at St. Edmund’s for quite a few years. One of the remarkable and highly adored teachers of this college was Brother Shannon. Dr. Guha has presented a few interesting glimpses of this extraordinary and dedicated teacher, Brother Shannon.

Ishani has attempted right from its birth to introduce eminent educationists and teachers of the North-eastern region. We are happy that we are able to introduce one more outstanding teacher through this article. Dr. Guha concludes his article with a sentence describing the day of farewell to Brother Shannon. He writes, “He left Shillong and St. Edmund’s in 1988 or 1989. The lump in my throat which I experienced when I was late for class one day, as a teacher, came back with a force the day he left.” This well describes the kind of sentiments Brother Shannon’s personality aroused in those who knew him for long.
This is one of the well-written, brief articles. It doesn’t introduce us to the entire personality of Brother Shannon, but as we have said in the beginning, it throws light on some of the memorable and interesting glimpses of a teacher who was respected and loved by all who studied under him and worked with him.

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Author

St. Edmund’s Shillong, a hallowed academic institution of repute, was a place where I spent over twenty five years, first as a student, both in school and in college, and then as a teacher. My proclivities in the teaching profession or whatever leaning I had towards it, flowered when I took over the onerous responsibility of being a college teacher. But that flowering was quintessentially a learning experience, a vigorous give and take; both from colleagues and students alike. Nestled in the picturesque Hill Station of Shillong, the then somnolent capital of Assam, St. Edmund’s had two departments: the School and the College. The School was established in the year 1915, and the College during the 1930s. It brought in its wake a legendary galaxy of Teachers and Principals: Brother Leonard, Brother Foley, Brother Vieyna and Brother Shannon to name only a miniscule few.

My memories of Brother M. G. Shannon date back to the 1960s when I was a child in school, in St. Edmund’s, Shillong. Though he was never my class teacher, he taught Physics to the seniors, and there were many jokes, circulating around him. For he was a repository of humor, and the Seniors often recounted his ready but acerbic wit. One of them was, while teaching Physics and grappling with complex ideas of the brain and light, he added (referring to the brain) “provided you have one!”

Then there was another narrative of how he pleaded with a boy, scissors in hand requesting him to cut his hair! The unpretentious teacher that he was, while bombarded with questions in the class he would ingeniously say: “Don’t
ask difficult questions”. But the general feeling was that, although he was not exactly a teaching maestro, he was an affable and essentially a student friendly person.

We graduated into the same Institution, that is, St. Edmund’s. College was different, more breathing space, more liberty, and, a feeling of emancipation. And there we had a closer look at Brother Shannon, first as the Vice Principal and then as the Principal of this picturesque college, with nature dancing a jig, and trees providing nuances of respite. As Vice Principal, we saw him mainly
running around the campus, mowing the sports field with a raucous machine, cutting the hedges, which guarded the main entrance of the College.

Then in the year 1977, after the term of Brother Vieyra as Principal was over, Brother M. G. Shannon stepped into his shoes as successor. Brother Vieyra too was no pushover. In fact he was a martinet. He would have nothing to do with the errant students, especially the type who would come whimpering to him, after an exam fiasco.

Then we saw the ‘real’ Brother Shannon, doing his rounds, ensuring that the classes were taking place. With meticulous precision, he would pounce upon any student he thought was not attending classes - in popular terminology, bunking classes! The rounds that he did were immaculate; cassock swirling he would move from classroom to classroom to tether his flock of students, who initially took him lightly, but who gradually understood that his admonitory nature was for their greater good.

One day I was loitering in front of the Notice Board, wondering what to do in the off period. “What class do you have now?” he questioned skeptically. “I have a free period now, Sir”, I replied (This was a fact). “Oh you always seem to have free classes!” he remarked rather dismissively. What a strange man I thought, and made it a point never to stand in front of the Notice Board, when classes were taking place, knowing that this would be an eyesore to him.

But my most intimate and friendly moments with Brother Shannon developed from the year 1981 when I joined St. Edmund’s College, Shillong as a young college lecturer. I saw the friendly ambience which he created: “Classes over?” he grinned at a student hastily coming out of the class and frantically beckoning to his friends. But the no-nonsense and disciplinary instincts continued. “Roll no. 42, where are you going?” he thundered, as a poker faced student stealthily but impishly sidled out of the classroom, heading for the main gate. “I have a free period, Sir”, he mumbled. “No, you do not, you have Physics”, he declared triumphantly and literally dragged him into the classroom amidst a bevy of highly amused boys. There was another anecdote of how he followed a student to Police Bazar and brought back a hapless victim from Eee Cee Restaurant to thralldom. Not withstanding the hyperbole or perhaps the veracity of such a happening, this presented a true picture of the ‘larger than life’ character which Brother Shannon portrayed. Such was his uncanny knack of knowing minds. But this was not limited to classes and bunking them. His comprehension of a student’s profile was breathtaking. Once, while recording the marks of students after an examination, he remarked: “This boy has improved tremendously. He passed in the third division in his matriculation examinations. Now he is consistently getting first division marks.” Sure enough this boy got a first in the University Examinations.

There were many other similar instances where he had a mental idea of students’ records and could reel them offhand. Such empathy for students is rare, and he had in his heart a quiescent but infinite love for them. His heart
went out to the disadvantaged and the less intellectual student and he measured academic caliber in very objective terms. He knew the limitations and strengths of each and every student. All this was because of the love that emanated from his heart, for them. Brother Shannon’s tenure as principal of St. Edmund’s College bristled with anecdotes - all underlying his facetious personality. There is another ‘story’ of how a ‘fresher’ in order to ingratiate him kept on following him, as he relentlessly went on with his work of mowing the lawns. “Anything more I can do for you, Sir?” the boy queried bravely. “Yes, keep following”, was his terse answer...

St. Edmund’s College, Shillong as of today

In Brother Shannon’s scheme of things ‘bunking’ classes was an attribute not only of students but could be that of Teachers as well! He ensured that Teachers were well in time for classes, always maintaining that raucous boys left alone in a class, were a nuisance to the other classes. We made it a point to be in the Teacher’s Common Room well ahead of the class. I remember one rainy day during the monsoons, I got up late for the morning class which was scheduled at 7.30 am. I got up with a lump in my throat and entered the precincts of the classroom ten to fifteen minutes behind schedule. As I walked in, trepidation writ large on my face, Brother Shannon stalked out of the classroom, from his routine but mandatory check. I thought that the heavens would fall. He looked at me, grinned, and then said: “Got up late?” In my eleven-and-half years stint at St. Edmund’s College, Shillong, I promised myself never to be late for a class, for the sake of a man who believed in the value of discipline and wanted us to imbibe it.

Brother Shannon was the College Principal, Postman, Gardener, Examination Superintendent all parceled into one. In fact, after every university examination he would personally embark into a taxi and deliver the answer scripts in the North Eastern Hill University. Such was his commitment; such was his love for a system which was an extension of his immutable love for his students and for the higher cause of education.
He left Shillong and St. Edmund’s in 1988 or 1989. The lump in my throat which I experienced when I was late for class one day, as a teacher, came back with a force the day he left.

He left behind him an abyss, but also a whole lot of talented disciplined and orderly students.

The motto of this hallowed institution: “Facta non verba” (“Deeds not words”) was what he singularly epitomized.

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About St. Edmund’s: The Christian Brothers were invited to Shillong in 1915 and St. Edmund’s College began functioning from 1916. It was, however, in 1923 that the College was ready to start Inter-Arts and Inter-Science classes, and affiliation to Calcutta University for these courses was received in 1923. The first classes of the University section of St. Edmund’s College started in 1924.

Bro. J E McCann was the first Principal of the College (he was also the Principal of the School at this time). Bro. I.O. Leary was the first Principal of the College (separate from the School).

St. Edmund’s College, Shillong, is one of the premier institutions of the North East of India and Meghalaya in particular. Since 1924 till the present date, St. Edmund’s College has maintained its excellence in academic records and discipline of the students.

From 1924 to 1936, St. Edmund’s College was only a junior college for Intermediate Arts and Science. At this level the college offered English, Alternative English, Latin, History, Maths, Geography, Physics, Chemistry for arts and science respectively. Today St. Edmund’s College has made commendable progress and has opened up different departments of various disciplines.
(Source: St. Edmund’s College website)

Quotes from Swami Vivekananda:

Words are secondary. Thoughts live, they travel far. Each thought we think is tinged with our own character, so that for the pure and holy person, even his jests or abuse will have the twist of his own love and purity and do good.
God has hidden himself best, and his work is best. So those who hide themselves best, accomplish most. Conquer yourself, and the whole universe is yours.

If the room is dark, do you go about beating your chest and crying, “It is dark, dark, dark!” No, the only way to get the light is to strike a light, and then the darkness goes.

The only way to realize the light above you is to strike the spiritual light within you, and the darkness of sin and impurity will flee away. Think of your higher self, not of your lower.

Talk given at Unity Hall, Hartford (Connecticut), USA, on March 8, 1895, as reported in “Hartford Times” (March 11, 1895). Complete Works, 1.327.