

ALFREDO SANTONASTASO
SCHOLAR CLINICIAN AND
PROFESSOR OF OPHTHALMOLOGY¹

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On May 27th. 1981 Professor ALFREDO SANTONASTASO died in Padua.

His death brings great grief not only to his family, but also to Padua University, the world of Ophthalmology, all his past students as well as to those who had occasion to appreciate his professional and human gifts.

Colleagues and friends wanted me to commemorate the figure of the Master. I am moved and honoured by the task, and deeply feel the gravity of this duty.

Forgive me if the description that I give of the person, at whose side I spent more than twenty years of my life, is inadequate in its form and incomplete in its substance.

Those who have been close to SANTONASTASO will know the most important characteristics of his personality, I hope that, those who met him only briefly will have, cause to meditate upon that which, in my opinion, illuminates the figure of a true Master – not only of science but also of life.

¹ Commemoration at the Trivenetian Ophthalmological Society.
Padua, 17/10/1981

The Master

ALFREDO SANTONASTASO was born at Casagiove (Caserta) in 1895. He entered the Rome University Eye Clinic as a young medical graduate, where he had Professor GIUSEPPE CIRINCIONE as his teacher then at the peak of his fame as a clinician, scholar and professor. In that intense and hard-working atmosphere, SANTONASTASO became attached to LUIGI MAGGIORE whom he followed to Bari as his Senior Registrar, and at whose side he remained for several years.

When MAGGIORE was transferred to Pisa, SANTONASTASO stayed behind as temporary director of Bari University Eye Clinic, from where he went to Sassari, where he was made permanent head of department after several years. From Sassari he went to Padua in 1939 where he stayed until his retirement in 1965. In the succeeding years his interest in ophthalmology remained alive and keen through participation in congresses and meetings.

In 1975 he was honorary President of an international ophthalmological symposium in Catania. Last year we saw him among us at Treviso at the international meeting on ocular toxoplasmosis organised by VINCENZO CHINAGLIA.

He continued to study and write until the last days of his life, aware and alert, wanting to keep abreast of the progress in our field.

He died after an illness which, although painful and inexorable in its progress, did not dull his intellect until the last moments or his readiness towards those who surrounded him with love. He died peacefully, in that peace which belongs to those who have trodden the Right path, carried out their duties humanely, and have seen the Tree – planted with love in greener years – flower and bear fruit.

The scientific works of ALFREDO SANTONASTASO bear the fundamental imprint of his preparation in morphology and clinical medicine. In his earliest group of works, his first paper concerning disorders of ocular motility following rachi-anaesthetics and lumbar puncture is outstanding. It is a quite consistent and analytical work, which seeks to discriminate the response of endorachidal manipulations from those of basal conditions in pathogenesis of the oculomotor disorders. It is a contribution which, at the time it was written, had notable repercussions, especially as there was a growing diffusion of rachi-anaesthetics.

His works dealing with ocular manifestations in leprosy and contributions on trachoma are of important interest. These illnesses were studied in patients in the Leprosarium at Aquaviva. His many clinical and experimental observations on ocular leprosy are gathered together in a monograph which even today forms an appreciable source of original ideas.

As far as trachoma is concerned, SANTONASTASO was the first to describe an amyloid degeneration of the trachomatous cornea and to underline the importance of superior, limbal neovascularisation in order to diagnose trachoma.



Fig. 1: Alfredo Santonastaso (1895 – 1981)

Other fields investigated with very interesting results were histopathology of the hydrophthalmus, ocular pathology of focal infections, and traumatic pathology of the retina. Outstanding among his later works is the paper on „*factors of localisation in ophthalmology*” which he presented to the *Italian Ophthalmological Society*. This paper underlines our scarce knowledge on the subject, and draws attention to the value which anatomic-functional conditions can have in causing the beginning of a pathological process in a specific site as opposed to another one.

One of SANTONASTASO's favourite subjects was the evolutive dynamics of ocular refraction. Concerning this, there are a series of contributions which begin in 1930 with an original² study on ocular refraction (in the first years of life), the results of which must be considered of great interest. In this research, refraction carried out in newborn infants using atropin revealed hyperopia in 70%, myopia in 25% and emmetropia in the remaining 5% of the cases. This research also shows that the astigmatism present in newborn infants is percentually higher than that in adults. The incidence of this astigmatism is greatly reduced in the first year of life, which demonstrates the dynamic character of the various elements by which refraction is determined in the first years of life.

Recent research by American authors has confirmed the originality of SANTONASTASO's studies. He never lost interest in his work on the problems of refraction. I should further like to recall the work in Padua dedicated to the problem of myopia and a more recent contribution on the subject of „*refraction during the life-span*” – the title of a paper given at Sarajevo.

He worked and studied refraction until the very end of his life; finding in this field food for thought in a work programme, as well as satisfaction for his spirit of ophthalmological scholar. Several large files contain the many pages he wrote on this subject in this last period. ANGELO FERRANTE undertook the task of summarising some of the most interesting points from these notes. It was during the developing period of this research that SANTONASTASO died.

From what I have briefly described up to this point, the figure of ALFREDO SANTONASTASO emerges with the features of a serious ophthalmological scholar, scrupulously attentive, engaged from the very beginning in unusual subjects in this specialised field, not only in the limits of physio-pathological optics but also in that of semeiology and clinical medicine. Some of his contributions must be regarded as original and worthy of firmly belonging to the great doctrinal body of our specialised field.

His nearness to LUIGI MAGGIORE, a brilliant mind in the science of ophthalmology, was certainly extremely stimulating at a general formative level, and in particular concerning the relative contribution to problems of vision.

² „None of the previous cycloplegic studies (except Santonastaso's) examined the refractive status of younger infants over the course of the first post natal years” (FULTON et al., 1980).

This general summary of SANTONASTASO's scientific activity would be incomplete if I did not mention his great gifts in clinical medicine and the wonderful way he had of putting things over to those who were listening to him.

I like to remember him bending over a patient, keenly observing the ocular fundus to reveal minute lesions whose significance was subsequently analysed and discussed with his students.

In revealing these data he was really tireless; the observations were often transformed into quick sketches and from these they were re-analysed and discussed again until a unanimous decision was reached on the objective data. There was no presumption in his observations, which were always precise and to the point; he had a way of expressing his thoughts clearly to even the most inexperienced students, phrasing elegantly his ideas.

Another of my memories is his performance of a retinal detachment operation with WEWE's technique, when he proceeded prudently, one diathermy after another, patiently explaining step by step what he was doing to those who were assisting him.

He was a systematic and patient observer; a born teacher: clear, patient, strong in his analytic capacity in semeiology and in his sense of clinical medicine. I remember the case of a patient with a retinal detachment who consulted an eminent Italian professor, a well-known expert in the surgery of retinal detachment at that time. The famous professor carefully studied the fundus during a whole morning while I held the lamp. The surgical programme was drawn on a sketch of the fundus. When the consultant professor was gone, SANTONASTASO went back to study the fundus one again. It had already been examined so much, but on looking further he found more lesions which had escaped the preceeding and certainly most attentive observations on the part of the famous consultant. The map was, therefore, corrected according to the new findings, and the patient successfully operated.

Occasionally he would suggest study topics or research, although he always avoided impositions. He left us all ample freedom of choice of study topic or research and never interfered with his co-workers, whose personalities he respected.

As he was fundamentally interested in morphology, he had a weak spot for good histo-pathological documentation to integrate the text. I remember the fright with which, as a young graduate in Padua, I received a small box containing a large number of eyeballs – coloured in toto, preserved in paraffin and catalogued – with the somewhat pressing invitation to cut and study them! A thousand cases, a thousand problems, a thousand subjects – an ocean it seemed to me, in which my best intentions would drown.

I like to remember him carefully examining his students' work. The discussion of the contents was always precise, articulate, convincing and extremely useful.

His school flourished and I cannot remember everyone clearly, but allow me to mention the names of some of his oldest students: ANGELO FERRANTE in Padua, MARIO MECCA in Verona, BRUNO AMIDEI in Vicenza, ENZO CHINAGLIA in Treviso, DINO ROSSETTI in Belluno. Destiny reserved a long road for me, which my dear professor guided with affection, perseverance and firmness until I reached the difficult goal of the university. We may certainly feel privileged that we had his faith and support.

He was a clinician, convinced of the existence of bonds which link ocular pathology to the organism's constitution and general pathology, and he always insisted in the necessity of recognising these connections.

He had a very solid foundation in general medicine and in neuro-ophthalmology. He strove to create in his students a consciousness in ocular pathology inspired by the Hippocratic principle of the biological unity of the organism.

He never thought of himself as infallible, although he did not easily renounce some of his own personal convictions in the fields of diagnosis and therapy. On more than one occasion he encouraged his students to study certain subjects in depth at famous schools of medicine, and so AMIDEI went to Paris to study squints under HARTMANN, CREPALDI went to Bonn to study pleoptics under MÜLLER, and I went to Paris to study plastic surgery under TESSIER.

He was interested in social medicine which reminds me that it was SANTONASTASO who founded an ophthalmological outpatients section in Padua as part of the medical school programme. The *Trivenetian Ophthalmological Society*, which sees us united here today, was founded by SANTONASTASO who was its first president.

Among the various honours showered upon him (which he neither sought nor aimed at), the gold merit medal at school for art and culture, and the gold merit medal for Public Health should be remembered as significant.

He was president of the *Italian Ophthalmological Society* from 1963 to 1965.

The Man

It could well be said that ALFREDO SANTONASTASO was not only a Professor of science but also of life.

He deeply loved his profession, which he practised with great respect for his patients' sufferings, always aware of his responsibilities as a healer, always available to his patients, whose anxieties and worries he understood.

He was a Master in ethics and an example to the whole school. He honoured and respected his own professors, CIRINCIONE and MAGGIORE, with filial devotion. He was always fully conscious of his duties, and occasionally of his rights, towards his patients and students.

This all came from an innate sense of honesty and knowledge of what is right. Even under this aspect his teaching was precious for his students, to whom he left, the fundamental rules of correct behaviour and judgement as inheritance, which was difficult in certain circumstances. He was always an example of wisdom in running the Eye Clinic. Occasionally, we young students – this is precisely what we were – mistook his caution, his correctness and his moderation for a sign of weakness. Today, in retrospect, and as professors called in turn to resolve our students' and coworkers' problems, we must now recognise in SANTONASTASO qualities which sometimes appeared as uncertainties. In reality they were always well thought of and tormented choices, which were eventually the best for our good.

He always shrank from intrigue and subterfuge in public life and in that of the clinic. He organised the working of the latter along the lines of gratitude for the work done, sacrifices made, devotion to research, in the understanding of duty which the membership of a scientific institute entails.

Generous in giving, he asked only that we should be dedicated, scientifically honest, respectful of research and moral values which should guide our work.

His modesty was exemplary, sometimes even excessive, but always authentic and genuine. An example of this are his words in the preface of the paper to the *Italian Ophthalmological Society* with which he, as instigator of the main theme and director of the co-ordination of the complex argument, gave all the credit for what had been done to his co-workers.

When we met to celebrate his receiving the gold merit medal for Public Health, he said quite simply: „I know that many of you have now surpassed me in fundamental training and technique; this gives me great joy because it means that new, strong and vigorous branches have been born from this old tree trunk and that this tree has born fruit.”

During the years of his teaching in Padua, the University Eye Clinic moved from its previous seat in the wonderful but old Hospital of Padua, to its present location in the Polyclinic.

I remember the anxiety of innovation and renovation with which SANTONASTASO occupied himself in preparing the transfer to the new location. He dedicated himself to organising a new, worthy eye clinic with a zeal which surprised us in its enormity and its sincerity.

He was so proud and enthusiastic about the new eye clinic. He got everything running remarkably well and welcomed Italian and foreign friends with whom he enjoyed the most amicable and valuable relationships. In this lovely new clinic to which he dedicated such care, retirement age caught up with him.

Having handed over the direction of the Paduan Eye Clinic to his faithful and competent successor FRANCO D'ERMO, a young and enthusiastic professor of Italian ophthalmology, SANTONASTASO retired modestly and simply to his ho-

me, and his books and continued to exercise his profession, although on a reduced scale.

Always busy, until the last days of his life he continued to read, study and write for his own pleasure subjects which interested him. As I have already said, the results of his last work are contained in large files of which his oldest and most intimate students have some idea. His was a unique and discreet way of serving ophthalmology; a sign of his continual interest in the discipline which for so many years he had cultivated. He worked in a little study surrounded by books and papers. In this little room he received his most intimate friends and his old students, who always found in him the same affection, warmth, aristocratic amiability, the same gentle tone of voice and the same moderation as ever.

The illness from which he died did not disturb his spirit or alter his serenity. The picture I retain of the last months of his life is that of a contented and serene man, worried perhaps only about burdening his loved ones with his illness. He was satisfied by what he had made of his life and by what he had got out of it, and he peacefully welcomed death which he felt approaching, without fear.

Some months ago I heard of his admission to the Polyclinic and I rushed to his bedside. He was happy to see me, but also somewhat worried because of my rush. When I promised to return shortly he said: „MORO, you know how glad I am to see you; but please do not neglect your eye clinic on my account, your patients need you so much. I can always wait.” He left me with that gentle, fatherly look which said so much more than words.

He was a very religious man. I discovered this incidentally on the day when my examination to become a university director was successfully concluded. When the commission had left after signing the formal papers, I remained alone with my professor in great happiness. Quietly Santonastaso took my arm and said: „MORO, we have made it. Let us go and thank the Lord.” So we went slowly to the not very distant church of S. Maria Maggiore, where we stood for a moment of silent contemplation illuminated by the midday sunlight. It all happened with the natural spontaneity of a believer.

This deep religious sense remained with ALFREDO SANTONASTASO until his death. As was his style, he left this life quietly in great spiritual peace with no fuss, comforted by the affection of his loved ones and having seen for the last time his closest old students.

I saw him once more before he died. I was very moved by the memory of so many years of communal work and experiences together.

The meeting was a quiet one, almost on the obscure line which separates life from death, but still in time for him to shake my hand, and with a sustained and intense glance to transmit the warmth of an unaltered and paternal affection. It was a true farewell between two people who were about to part affectionately after having travelled so far together.

Before concluding, let me finally recall SANTONASTASO's sacred love for his family. I vividly remember his meeting with his father (then in his eighties) when he visited the eye clinic in Padua. I also remember his love and thousand kindnesses towards his sisters, the harmonious relationship which always united him and his dear wife VERA, the care he took of his children, and the respect for the memory of one of his little girls who tragically died only a few years after he had arrived in Padua.

My dear friends, I do not know if I have been able to trace a true picture of ALFREDO SANTONASTASO through my emotional and fragmentary memories. I do know for certain however, that with him we have lost a real Master of Italian ophthalmology, an eminent and respected head of institute, a man who left the indelible mark of his work and teaching in the minds and hearts of those who knew and studied under him.

His wife VERA, who would certainly have felt with us the emotion of this commemorative day in recalling the long and happy life of her husband, unfortunately is not here. Destiny decreed that she should follow her dear ALFREDO not long after him. To both of them, ALFREDO and VERA, let us turn our moving thoughts.

To his children, whom ALFREDO SANTONASTASO loved so much, and to all his relatives, let us dedicate this last sign of our admiration and our affectionate respect.

Summary

Professor Alfredo Santonastaso was a remarkable ophthalmologist, an experienced clinician, an excellent researcher and an outstanding academic teacher. His humane character has made him immortal.

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MORO, F. – Alfredo Santonastaso, Savant, Clinicien et Professeur d'Ophtalmologie (1895 – 1981)

Resumé

Le Professeur Alfredo Santonastaso était un grand médecin, un clinicien averti, un savant éminent et un excellent professeur, dont les qualités humaines étaient hors de pair.

MORO, F. – Alfredo Santonastaso, Sabio, Clínico y Profesor de Oftalmología (1895 – 1981)

Resumen

El Profesor Alfredo Santonastaso fue un gran médico, un clínico experto, un sabio eminente y un excelente profesor, cuyas calidades humanas eran incomparables.

**MORO, F. – Alfredo Santonastaso, ein Wissenschaftler, Kliniker und Professor
der Ophthalmologie (1895 – 1981)**

Zusammenfassung

Professor Alfredo Santonastaso war ein bedeutender Mediziner, ein erfahrener Kliniker, ein ausgezeichnete Wissenschaftler und ein hervorragender Hochschullehrer. Vor allem seine menschlichen Eigenschaften machen ihn unvergesslich.

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