

Cir_Ref. No: LPO/47/2022

01th January 2022

Dear Confreres, members of the Salesian Family and friends,

Prayers for you as we enter a new year. May this New year bring us hope, joy, optimism, zeal, enthusiasm, interest, encouragement and love!

This year, the month of January is very special to all of us especially on **13th January** wherein we commemorate the centenary of the arrival of the First Salesian Missionaries in North East India Shillong.

As we are in the Centenary Year of the arrival of the Salesian Charism in North East India particularly in Shillong. I would like to share with you about the *Journey of the Pioneer Missionaries to Shillong*.



THE JOURNEY TO THE PROMISED LAND - NORTH EAST INDIA

On 22nd December they were in Marseilles and the same evening they stepped aboard the Kaiser-i-Hind, a P. and O. steamer of 11,000 tons. The night was calm and the sky spangled with stars. Helped by an Irish Carmelite who spoke French, the Salesians prepared for Christmas Holy Mass in the second-class dining-room, with the kind permission of the captain. The Carmelite sang the Holy Mass, the Salesians sang *Missa de Angelis*, Fr. Louis Mathias accompanied them on the piano, and a Maltese gentleman played the violin. After the Holy Mass, a small statue of the Child Jesus was set out on a table, and among the faithful were a group of Goan sailors, members of the ship's crew, who filed by it and kissed it reverently. This was the Salesians' first experience of Indian devotion.

The journey through the Suez Canal and across the Indian Ocean was peaceful and uneventful: it was mostly out of sight of land except when the ship was negotiating the canal. Fr. Louis Mathias had time to sit down and leisurely write letters, some to the superiors in Turin in which he gave details of almost every knot of the way!

The Salesians docked in Bombay port on 06th January 1922 and went in search of the Jesuit College of St. Xavier's, the address of which someone had given them. They found it all right, though not without difficulty. The Jesuits were kind and very helpful: they discussed plans of how the new missionaries would get to the railway station to travel to Calcutta. When this was fixed, one of the Jesuits gave the Salesians a guided tour through Bombay city. Bombay, at that time, was the most westernized town in India and for strangers it was a good introduction to the subcontinent, for here one could find all sorts of languages, races, and customs. It is as if one is stepping into an amazing dream-world of colours, action, and noises. The streets are wide; here and there were mission-like houses; there were squares, a lovely sea-front, and a hill where rose the big homes of English people and wealthy Indians.

For the Salesians, Bombay was a new world. They went to visit the famed *Tower of Silence*, the burial ground of the Parsees, but could not enter inside. They saw the vultures that sat around the rim of the tower and were told how corpses were laid out in rows on the ground inside the cylinder to be devoured by the birds! The Parsees, followers of Zoroaster, fled to India when their country was invaded by the Arabs: to them both earth and fire were sacred, hence their "fire temples" and their custom of not burying their dead.

St. Xavier's College did not have a sufficient number of rooms to house so many extra guests, so some Salesians had to pass their first night in India in a hotel. This experience was part of their introduction to their new, absolutely new, life! There were no clean sheets on the beds and the place was crawling with bedbugs!

Provincial Circular



Provincial Circular

The British had built a good network of railway lines throughout the country but because of the hard wooden carriages, the burning sunshine, the dust, and the long kilometers of travelling, the journey was monotonous. The Jesuits had begged the Salesians to reserve two carriages with sleeping accommodation. This went some way to relieve the monotony. As the train sped eastwards, the newcomers saw plains, paddy-fields aplenty, and hills: they also saw an abundance of exotic trees like mango, coconut palms, palmyras, papayas, bamboo clusters...herds of buffalo crowded into the shade afforded by trees or wallowed in pools of water or rivers, for all the world like hippopotamuses. When the train stopped at a station along the way, there was always a crowd of people, some boarding the train, others jumping off it and making for exits. There were plenty of vendors shouting their wares all along the platforms.

One of the Salesian Brothers took a fancy to a banana or two: he leaned out of the window and proffered a rupee to a hawker indicating that he wanted bananas. The hawker registered surprise on his face, but he placed the basket of bananas into the brother's hands and went off to get some more! The Brother realized what had happened: he motioned the man to keep the coin and he would keep some of the fruit and, after receiving his basket back, the Indian ran shouting happily along the platform. That was another experience to chalk up – the monetary system.

Besides the vendors there were hordes of beggars who kept their hands outstretched as they continuously cried for *baksheesh*. The poor creatures were clad in little more than rags and looked so emaciated! Fr. Louis Mathias wrote: "We gave them a few coins – not as much as we would have liked, for we too had not much money. Then again we did not know the value of the coins".

The train arrived in Calcutta on 09th January 1922 at 11 a.m., after some 46 hours' journey! Here again the Salesians found a welcome home in the house of the Jesuits. Just at that time the Archbishop of Calcutta, who was also looking after Assam, was absent, but his Auxiliary, Bishop Peter SJ, welcomed them and gave Fr. Mathias a run-down of the situation in Assam. He was most courteous and from that time on he became a good and valued friend of the Salesians, especially after he became archbishop of Calcutta.

As in Bombay so too in Calcutta, the Jesuits were kind and friendly and took the newcomers to see the sights of the city. Then on 11th January 1922, they boarded the train for the long journey northwards. There was not much change in the scenery except for more and more hills on the horizon. The following day they were at the mighty Brahmaputra River where the rails stopped. In those days there were no bridges: crossings had to be made on a ferry.

When they reached the far bank, they were met by Fr. Paul Lefebvre SJ, the Administrator of the Prefecture of Assam. He embraced the new missionaries and then with their luggage piled into a large motorcar, they made their way to Guwahati. Because it was too late to continue their journey, they slept that night in Guwahati. Their destination was the town on the mountains, Shillong, and to reach it they had to drive up a road which was open at certain times of the day: *ghats* (that is, mountain roads) were usually narrow so that up-traffic had their appointed hour so as not to conflict with down-traffic. The bus that carried the travelers had wooden benches for seats and solid rubber tyres: and with roads that were neither macadamized nor levelled the ride was no picnic!

The trip up brought the missionaries in among the jungles where the wild beasts they had often read about roamed at will – elephants, tigers, snakes, and others. Sometimes they saw one or two on the very road they were travelling! As a matter of fact, the bus stopped at one point: the driver got out of the driving seat and began lighting a fire under a huge snake that was coiled around a sheep!



Shillong is the capital of Assam: in those days they called it the “*flower town*”; it looked like a vast park with lovely bungalows here and there. These houses were usually of one storey, made of wood and with red sheet-iron roofs.

In a report about their arrival in Assam, Fr. Louis Mathias wrote to Father Philip Rinaldi then the Rector Major: “At the foot of a long slope that led to the Church, Fr. Van Lamberghé SJ, Brother Brisson and a dozen or so children stood waiting for us. They greeted us in Italian of a sort, ‘*Buon giorno, Padre!*’. It was a pleasant surprise which we enjoyed.” “We entered the Church.” He continued, “and were standing beside the main altar which had been made by a Salvatorian brother, when one of us exclaimed, ‘Look! There’s Mary Help of Christians!’ We turned our eyes to the point he indicated and there on an altar in the left-hand aisle we saw indeed a statue of Mary Help of Christians! Our Joy can best be imagined that described.” The Salesians had come home.

DAYS IN SHILLONG

There was much discussion about the statue, mentioned above and which is now preserved as a precious souvenir. Up to the arrival of the Salesians it had been venerated as “Queen of Apostles” but it was without doubt an image of Mary the Helper, just like the images to be found in Salesian Houses. The Jesuit Fathers had not any difficulty in accepting the ‘new’ title.

The eleven Salesians were taken to see the various apostolic activities in the mission-station and met the brothers and sisters who managed the schools. They were delighted at what they saw, especially since they had imagined they would be coming to mud huts in the jungle! But they found a lovely town, semi-Europeanized, with an organized nucleus of evangelical activities. That day they sang a very solemn and heartfelt *Te Deum* in the Church. Fr. Lefebvre was the principal minister with assistants on both sides. Fr. Louis Mathias played the harmonium. That night they were treated to another sort of ‘welcome’ that reminded them of stern realities – the roar of the tiger and a slight tremor of an earthquake.

The First Sunday, 15th January 1922, which the new missionaries spent in Shillong was marked by a Holy Mass in which they all sang Perosi’s *Te Deum Laudamus* music: the ceremony was much appreciated by the Jesuit fathers and also by the Khasi people who were and are musically inclined. The sermon was in the Khasi language which the Salesians did not understand. “How are we ever going to speak that language?” they whispered one to another. Later they visited the cemetery and found it neat and tidy (another characteristic of the Khasis).

That evening the official welcoming was given to the newcomers before a large crowd of people who had been informed of the event. It was a good occasion for everyone to become acquainted. Fr. Mathias replied to the speech of welcome and since he spoke no Khasi his words were translated by Fr. Lefebvre. The speaker mentioned that Salesians were not people from Silesia but rather a religious congregation, under the patronage of St. Francis de Sales, founded by Fr. John Bosco, a priest who lived in Turin, Italy, who gave his life for the spiritual and material welfare of the poor and unfortunate, especially young people.

He then distributed about 550 holy cards bearing an image of Mary Help of Christians, which gave Fr. Lefebvre the opportunity of explaining about the statue in the Church and the proposed new title it would be given. From that day onwards the Madonna of Don Bosco became part of the everyday life of the Khasis. The words of Don Bosco written to Fr. Cagliero must have re-echoed in their minds:

“Do the best you can: God will make up for what is lacking. Entrust everything to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians: then, you will see what miracles really are!”



Provincial Circular

A few days later a local feast was to be held in a village several kilometers from Shillong and the Salesians thought they would attend it, in order, as they said, “to seek up some local colour”. They watched the Khasi dance with interest: in it the women, clothed from head to toe completely in silk, wore elaborate necklaces and a silver crown on their head. The women shuffled slowly around in a circle without ever lifting their feet off the ground, without uttering a word and with their heads bowed down. The men, dressed up in garish costumes, jump around and brandish swords while shouting so much and so frighteningly as to make one’s hair stand on end!

The feast at Umpling, as in other villages could not end without a *Jingkhawai* (a banquet) for all those present. On this occasion the Salesians tasted curry and rice for the first time. The rice was boiled (and still is) in water then eaten with a generous supply of a sort of sauce made of piquant chilies. Even the palate was getting its ‘education’!

Language was a barrier any missionary usually has to face. The Salesians had to become sufficiently proficient in the English language as well as in the vernacular of the place where they are working. For this reason, they used to attend classes in St. Edmund’s School to learn the rudiments of English: at home they tried to converse in that language. Given the ages of the missionaries the language of Shakespeare proved rather difficult to manage. Yet they kept at it: meanwhile several were trying to get the Khasi language around them.

“These Salesians,” wrote Fr. Lefebvre to the Archbishop of Calcutta, “are a fine set of men: they are full of good will and talents. Their greatest drawback is that, with the exception of three of them, they cannot speak English: two months have now passed since they arrived here, but they are still battling with the elements of the language.” Not for nothing had Cardinal Van Rossum advised Fr. Mathias to stay with the Jesuits as long as possible. He wanted the missionaries to learn the *lingua franca* first of all. No language is easy to pick up. But the situation was not stalemate, on **11th March 1922, Fr. Emmanuel Bars SDB went into the pulpit and gave his first sermon in Khasi!** On 30th April it was the turn of Fr. Mathias. He preached in English to the European members of the congregation.

Not accustomed to sit twiddling their thumbs the Salesians cast about for other things to do besides getting to grips with the languages. They discovered in the house an old printing press and a case of letters: one evening they worked at it and were able to have it in working order. **One of the first items they printed were holy cards with the image of Mary Help of Christians on them and on the reverse side they printed in Khasi the formula for the novena to Our Lady which Don Bosco had continually recommended to people. They were justly proud of their first apostolic activity and distributed the cards to the congregation in the church on the 24th May 1922.**

The 24th was, and is, a very special day for the Salesian Family. It had particular meaning for the Salesians in Assam or North East India that May 1922, for it was the first occasion when they could show their devotion to the Mother of God and begin to communicate that enthusiasm to the people. There was a solemn procession in which the “re-entitled” statue was carried. The occasional discourse was given by Fr. Van Lamberghé SJ who, interpreting the desire of the missionaries, consecrated the entire mission to Mary Help of Christians our mother. This was the day when Fr. Loud Mathias read his first speech in Khasi.





SIGNIFICANT EVENTS 2022

I would like to ask all of you dear Confreres and in a very special way all the Rectors, Incharges of the communities and together with the members of the Salesian family to plan ahead for the important events leading to the Centenary Celebrations 2022.

- ✚ **13th January 2022:** Commemoration of the arrival of the Salesian Pioneers in Shillong on this day in 1922. There will be a Marian pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Mary Help of Christians, Shillong. It will culminate with a Solemn Eucharistic celebration.
- ✚ **September 2022:** International Symposium at St. Anthony's College, Shillong.
- ✚ **24th – 26th October 2022:** Visit of the Rector Major - Guwahati Province.
- ✚ **27th – 30th October 2022:** Youth Expo and visit of the Rector Major - Shillong Province.
- ✚ **30th October 2022:** Grand Finale at the Calvary of the Cathedral Parish, Shillong.

CONGRATULATIONS! NEW PROVINCIAL OF HYDERABAD

We would like to congratulate Fr. Santiago Thomas SDB of Hyderabad for having accepted to be the Provincial of Hyderabad Province. Fr. Santiago will be installed on **04th February 2022** by Fr. Biju Michael, the Regional. May the good Lord bless him. May Mother Mary and Don Bosco be by his side. We all pray and support him.

BIRTHDAY WISHES

I take this occasion to wish the confreres who celebrate their birthday this month God's choicest blessings on them and their ministry.

Dates	Names	Dates	Names
01	Cl. Shelestine Lyngdoh	13	Fr. Sylvester Synrem
	Br. Hadrian Rymbai	14	Cl. Lamkumar Nonglang
02	Br. Jerome Lyngdoh	15	Fr. Thomas Kunnamkudath (KA)
	Fr. Glorious Shullai		Fr. Anil Kido
03	Fr. George Shining Lyngkhai	17	Fr. Ritonbor Kharkongor
	Fr. Augustine Koottala	19	Fr. Dominic Ngul TT
04	Fr. Ioannis Eugene War	20	Fr. Gabriel Jalong
	Br. Lambert Lyngdoh	21	Cl. Marcellino Warjri
05	Cl. Lamshai John Thyriang	23	Fr. Genesius Wanniang
07	Fr. Jose M Kallanickal	25	Cl. Wantelang Khyllait
09	Fr. James Puthenthara (PA)	26	Fr. Telesphorus Nonglang
10	Fr. Patrick Nongrang	27	Fr. Raphael R Maiong
11	Fr. Joseph Pulinthanath (PJ)	28	Fr. Paul Olphindro Lyngkot
12	Fr. John D Jayakumar	31	Cl. Shanborlin Khardewsaw



CONDOLENCES

We offer our heartfelt condolences to the Provincials, confreres and family members of the confreres who have gone before us. We pray for the repose of the souls of:

- ✠ Fr. Thomas Vattoth SDB (IND)
- ✠ Fr. Samuel Sudorshon Mondol SDB (INC)

CONCLUSION

I have nearly finished the Provincial Visitation 2021 – 2022 in the six regions of the province. I will move to Mizoram in the middle of the month of January 2022. I would also like to offer and surrender the Centenary Year 2022 to our Blessed Mother, Mary Queen of Hope and Encouragement.

Mother Mary, like many mothers throughout the world, is an example of strength and courage in accepting new life and in sharing the suffering of their children. Although she had no idea of what awaited her when she accepted to bear God's Son, Mother Mary in that instant appears to us like one of the many mothers in our world, courageous to the extreme. Her motherly love and courage are seen again at the foot of the cross. She teaches us the virtue of waiting even when everything appears meaningless. Pope Francis says, "We are not orphans, we have a mother in heaven. In difficult moments, Mother Mary guides our steps."



Mother Mary is a woman who meditates, in her heart, on every word and every event. She is not a woman who is depressed in front of the uncertainties of life, especially when nothing seems to be going right. Instead, she is a woman who listens and is a mother of hope.

Do not forget: There is always a great relationship between hope and listening. And Mother Mary is a woman who listens, who welcomes existence as it comes to us with its happy days as well as its tragedies, which we never want to encounter. Mother Mary never betrays, and in that instance, at the foot of the cross, none of us can say which one was the crueler passion: that of the innocent man who dies on the scaffold of the cross or the agony of a mother who accompanies her son in his final moments of life. Mother Mary was there not just out of faithfulness to God's divine plan but also because of her instinct as a mother who just suffers every time her child suffers.

Mother Mary teaches people and all of us to hope in life's darkest moments. She offers us today and the days to come – a mother and model of hope. A Mother never loses hope on her child no matter how bad the situation may be. A disciple of Jesus never loses hope in God no matter how bad the situation may be.

Yours in Don Bosco,



Fr. Paul Olphindro Lyngkot SDB
Provincial

