

Mother Teresa and the Salesian Alumni

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Over a span of almost 50 years of her mission for the poorest of the poor several Salesians have crossed their path with Nobel laureate Mother Teresa. It is quite difficult to list contributions by Salesians to Mother Teresa over the years at the peril of not mentioning all.

Father Attilio Colussi: The Preacher

The Salesian connect with Mother Teresa started on 7th October 1950, in the Cathedral of the Most Holy Rosary at the start of Mother Teresa's mission when parish priest Father Attilio Colussi preached at the first profession Eucharist held for the first batch of 12 Missionaries of Charity (MC) Sisters. Till his death in 1988 at the age of 81 Fr Colussi continued to assist spiritually the MCs. At spiritual retreats and conferences for religious Fr Colussi used to narrate the origins of Mother Teresa's call to serve the poorest and abandoned. The incident that took place when Mother Teresa was Headmistress of Loreto St Mary's School Entally for Indian children situated in the same campus of Loreto School Entally for European and Anglo-Indian girls was a life changer.

In one of Mother's Geography classes in St Mary's, a girl fainted. On regaining consciousness the girl told Mother Teresa, "I have not eaten since yesterday. If only you come and see our homes in Mothijheel, then you will know poverty and starvation." In the same afternoon, Mother went with her Motijheel students to see for herself the pathetic conditions of her children suffering during the great Bengal famine of 1943 during which at least 3 million people reportedly died from starvation and malnutrition.

Father Luciano Colussi: The Catechist

Father Colussi's nephew Father Luciano Colussi during his stay in Calcutta as founder of the Don Bosco Catechetical and Multimedia Centre (now called Nitika) invited two Salesians from National Catechetical Centre (LDC-Torino) in Italy in 1977 - Father Mario and Brother Guerrino Pera - to take slides of Mother Teresa's works for an audio visual programme entitled "Mother Teresa". Mother Teresa had also entrusted the "catechetical training" of her junior sisters to Fr Luciano who was also the archdiocesan director for catechetics.

Father Joseph Thelekkat: Mother's Son

Salesians of neighbouring Guwahati province too had interaction with Mother Teresa when Assistant Headmaster of premier Don Bosco School Guwahati Fr Joseph Thelekkat sent a group of his senior students for an excursion to Calcutta in 1977. Father Thelekkat instructed them to visit Mother Teresa who told them of her desire to start a home in Guwahati even in a rented place. Students reported Mother Teresa's wish to Father Thelekkat who mobilized people and in 1978 Dr K.C. Das offered one of his houses in Guwahati to Mother Teresa to start her work, says Fr Thelekkat.

Then Chief Minister of Assam Golap Borbora and civil dignitaries accorded Mother a warm welcome at District Library Guwahati. MC Sisters often refer to Father Thelekkat who later became provincial and

currently principal of Don Bosco College Bongaigaon as ``Mother`s son.`` Father Thelekkat however recalls that, though the people of Guwahati loved Mother Teresa, some of them objected to have Mother`s poor and suffering people live in their locality. After the initial opposition some 40 years ago, today there are three Mother Teresa homes in Guwahati.

Father Strocio Rosario: The Chaplain & Exorcist

Another Italian priest Father Strocio Rosario, a former provincial of the Calcutta province (1967 to 1972) became a controversial figure during his missionary work in Maliapota (Nadia Dist) when government served deportation order on trumped up `conversion` charges. Mother Teresa stepped in and requested the government to have him as her chaplain to the MC Sisters at Prem Dan Tengra, a large rehabilitation center for T.B. patients. The authorities relented, withdrew the deportation order, and Father Strocio (now 94 years old) stays put at Auxilium Parish Tengra since 1979. In another instance, late Archbishop Henry D`Souza of Calcutta, asked Fr Strocio to pray over (read exorcise) the 87 year old Mother Teresa who was in the hospital with heart problem. Mother Teresa was suffering from insomnia and acting strangely. The Archbishop said of the situation that, ``when doctors said they could not find a medical reason for her sleeplessness, I thought she might be getting attacked by the devil.`` After Father Strocio prayed over her, she was calm and slept peacefully. That was in 1997 during Mother`s final illness.

Calcutta Street Children Ministry Collaboration-

Mother Teresa encouraged Salesians to work for children found in the streets. ``We shall take care of the girls, you take care of the boys`` she said when Fr Anthony Thaiparampil started Ashalayam in the same room rented by Dominique Lapierre author of The City of Joy in Howrah`s Pilkhana slum in 1985.

Former Ashalayam Directors Frs Mathew Parakonath and George Chempakathinal recalls how MC Sisters at neighbouring Shishu Bhavan in Pilkhana came to their assistance in the early stages of hardships. Mother Teresa came for the blessing of the first Ashalayam shelter in 1991 at Belileous Road Howrah and for second Ashalayam shelter at Bhatnagar in 1995. She also came for the inauguration of Ashalayam for girls started in 1993 under the care of Sisters Adorers. Till 1995 Christmas, Ashalayam children would go Carol singing to Mother House to share the Christmas spirit. Mother would come down and be with the children and distribute cakes to all.

Father Lukose Cheruvalel: Heeding the Call-

Founder director of Snehalaya, home for street children, Father Lukose Cheruvalel recalls how his desire to work for the street children was born in 1991 as assistant Headmaster of Assam`s premier Don Bosco School Guwahati, when he invited Mother Teresa to address students. When he shared his thoughts with Mother Teresa she assured him of her collaboration saying, ``My Sisters will give you all the boys.`` That desire became a compelling call as Father Lukose sat at Netaji Indoor Stadium witnessing the state funeral accorded to Mother Teresa on 13 September 1997. On returning to Guwahati he resigned his job as secretary to archbishop of Guwahati and started his work for street children. Mother Teresa`s Sisters took care of Father Lukose`s boys for six months at MC Home Baralumuk Guwahati.

Salesians and MC Missions in Yemen-

The Indian Salesians were invited to take up the mission of Yemen in 1987 when Giovanni Bernardo Gremoli O.F.M. Cap., was the Apostolic Vicar of Arabia and have continued rendering their services

through priests from Salesians of Don Bosco Bangalore province till 5th March 2016 when the last Salesian who stayed back in Yemen Fr Tom Uzhunnalil was kidnapped. Fr Tom followed the footsteps of his uncle Fr Mathew Uzhunnalial who was the pioneer in Yemen.

“Mother Teresa’s intervention in this mission effort to Yemen is not known much,” says former Salesian provincial of both Calcutta and New Delhi provinces Fr Joseph Kezhakkekara.

It was in 1986 that Fr Kezhakkekara, then provincial of Calcutta invited Mother Teresa to address the general chapter of Salesians of Don Bosco at their Generalate in Rome. After addressing some 200 chapter members from over 90 plus provinces representing some 120 plus countries, Mother Teresa made a surprise appeal to then Rector Major Fr Egidio Vigano.

“I would like the Salesian Congregation to help my Sisters working in Yemen said Mother Teresa,” recalls Fr Kezhakkekara now in New Delhi. He adds, “Coming out of the Aula Magna of the Generalate Fr Vigano was quick to ask the Provincial of Bangalore province Fr Thomas Thayyil to send priests to Yemen.” The Salesians from India were the only Catholic priests working in Yemen and render their services in four centres - Sana`a, the Capital; Aden, Hodeida and Taiz. In all these centres they worked in close collaboration with the MC Sisters present in the country since 1970.

Auxilium Parish Calcutta and Mother Teresa

The Parish priest of Auxilium parish (estd. 1974) Fr John Puthieydathchali says, “our parish boasts of four centres of Mother Teresa including the first shed in which Mother started off her network of institutions since 1950 in Motijheel which today has some 600 Catholic families, Prem Dan and Shanti Dan (Sisters) and Deepshikha (Brothers). Father Kuzhipala Sebastian former parish priest of Auxilium and one instrumental to build the imposing church was a close associate of Mother Teresa. He established the Hathgachia Christian colony in early 1990s which the Kolkata Municipal Corporation was to demolish depriving poor Christians of their shelter. Fr Kuzhipala had Mother Teresa act in a most dramatic way to stop the Corporation bulldozers that came to clear the colony.

Later Fr Kuzhipala as parish priest of Berhampore also had a life size Mother Teresa statue installed in front of District Magistrate’s Office in Bengal’s Murshidabad district to mark her 10th death anniversary in 2007 along with a 3-day Mother Teresa international Film Festival hosted at iconic Rabindra Bhavan.

Arunachal Missions and Mother

Since 1977 Christian institutions were forbidden in the North Eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. Two young Salesian priests Fr Jose Chemparathy (Itanagar) and Fr Job and George Palliparambil (now Bishop of Miao in Arunachal) were working in Borduria of Arunachal area in the early 1980s. In a chance meeting of Fr Chemparathy with Mother Teresa in Calcutta in 1986 she expressed her desire to send MCs to Arunachal. In 1992 the MC Sisters had their first home at Pappunalla near Naharlagan close to state capital Itanagar and their second home in Borduria which Mother visited in 1993.

Mother and Archbishop Menamparampil-

Archbishop emiratus Thomas Menamparampil of Guwahati recalls Mother Teresa as a cleric in Salesian seminary Bandel in 1958. As former Bishop of Dibrugarh and newly appointed archbishop of Guwahati Thomas Menamparampil accompanied Mother Teresa by car from Guwahati for the blessing of the first

church in Arunachal at Borduria in 1993. Mother sacrificed Pope John II's invitation to go with him to World Youth Day in Denver to be in Arunachal. On another occasion in 1980 when Archbishop arrived on a delayed flight past midnight from Bombay to Calcutta Mother reached him to Salesian Provincial House Tengra and left only after he was taken into the house. ``Mother gifted me seven convents in the dioceses of Dibrugarh and Guwahati,`` he said. He recalled how Mother Teresa threw the miraculous medal of Our Lady over the Berlin Wall and after its collapse gifted 15 convents (signifying 15 decades of the Holy Rosary) to the former USSR countries.

Other Salesians and Mother Teresa-

Salesian Provincial of Guwahati and President of Conference of Religious India Fr Thomas Vattathara claims of miraculous healing by Mother Teresa's favour and has put together a calendar of civic and religious events to mark St Teresa of Calcutta's sainthood in Guwahati. He is leading a team of eminent artistes from Assam to the Rome celebrations. Among frequent retreat preachers to MC Sisters are Frs Sebastian Champanil and James Mathew. Mother and her sisters were frequent visitors to the historic Marian shrine of Our Lady of Happy Voyage at Bandel ministered by Salesians. Headmaster Fr Thomas Kayyalakal brought Mother Teresa to Bandel St John's School for its 125 year celebrations held in 1995 and organized a civic reception for Mother.

Fr Jacob Irupakatt of Nitika Communications Calcutta had the first CD album of 10 songs on Mother Teresa entitled ``Flame in the Slum`` composed and released just 60 days after her death in 1997.

For her beatification in 2003 then Nitika director Fr C.M. Paul brought out a 16 minute video from rare Mother Teresa slides entitled ``Blessed Teresa of Calcutta.`` The short film was curtain raiser for MTIFF 1 & 2 (Mother Teresa International Film Festival) which he founded and directed in 2003 and 2007. The short video was dubbed into nine Indian languages.

Salesian Alumni & Mother Teresa

Among Salesian alumni associated with Mother Teresa are Fr Orson Wells of Calcutta associated with Mother since 1959 and has installed the statues of Mother Teresa in several churches (Bamandanga, Moulali, Park Circus), Chairman of Mother Teresa International Award Committee Mr Arun Anthony Biswas, and CEO of Church Art Kolkata Mr Subrata Ganguly well known for Mother Teresa statues including the life size bronze statue sculpted and installed by him at Archbishop's House Calcutta, 26 August 2016. The statue was unveiled by Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to mark the canonization of St Teresa of Calcutta.



Top L to R: Frs Tom & Mathew Uzhunnalil; Frs Attlio Colussi & Strocio Rosario.

Bottom L to R: Fr Joseph Thelekkatt; Fr Lukose Cheruvalel, Frs Sebastian Kuzhipala and Champanil.