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of the General Council  
of the Salesian Society  
of St John Bosco

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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***“We’ve been waiting for you.  
We’ve been waiting for you so long.  
Now at last you’re here.  
You’re among us and you won’t get away from us!”  
(MB XVIII, 50)***

## **PRESENTATION OF THE REGION OF SOUTH ASIA**

21 September 2006  
*Feast of St Matthew, Apostle*

### Introduction

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My dear confreres,

Three months have passed since I published the letter convoking the GC26. It met with a very positive reception everywhere, as witness the numerous e-mails and letters that I have received and continue to receive, expressing the joy and satisfaction of the

confreres with the theme chosen, their pride in being sons of Don Bosco, and their willingness to bring about the personal, community and institutional changes needed to keep us always faithful to God, to Don Bosco and to the young.

And now, in this present letter, I want to take up again the presentation of the Regions. And as I begin to write, my mind is still full to overflowing with living memories of my two visits to the Region of South Asia: the first, in February 2005, to the Provinces of Kolkata, Guwahati and Dimapur in north-east India, and to New Delhi, the Indian capital to inaugurate the centenary celebrations of Salesian work in India and subsequently preside at the Team Visit; and the second, in February 2006, to Sri Lanka for the celebration of fifty years of Salesian work in that island country, and to the Indian Provinces of Chennai, Bangalore and Hyderabad, and especially to Thanjavur, in the Tiruchy Province for the conclusion of the centenary celebrations.

I look forward to my next visit in February 2007, to the remaining Provinces of the Region: those of Bangalore (and specifically to Kerala for the golden jubilee of Salesian work in that State) and Mumbai, to the Vice-province of Panjim (for the diamond jubilee of Salesian work there), to the Vice-Province of Myanmar, and to Ranchi in the Province of New Delhi.

In my first visits to the Region I was deeply impressed by the extraordinarily fruitful growth of the Salesian charism as lived and manifested in the various Provinces. In my mind's eye I can still see the faces of the thousands of young people, full of life and enthusiasm that I met in the course of different events. Wherever I went I heard the shouts of children and young people ringing in my ears: "Long live Don Bosco!" How could I ever forget the meeting at Chennai, where more than 15,000 youngsters from our institutes gathered together for a peace rally? All the jubilation was an expression of their joy at having been educated by the Sons of Don Bosco, of belonging to the Salesian Family, and of being able to meet Don Bosco's successor.



This first centenary of Salesian activity in the Region has truly been a gift of God to the Church and the Congregation. For the Salesians it marks the conclusion of a century of learning, in which we have grown and fulfilled Don Bosco's dream for the benefit of the young, a century of abundant blessings. At this point I must express the gratitude of the Congregation to all those who have been the instruments of this wonderful development. The vibrant Salesian work in the Region at the present day is the fruit of the pioneering enterprise of missionaries from other countries who made of Don Bosco's "*Da mihi animas*" the reason and driving force of their life. They planted the Salesian charism which is now bearing such abundant fruit. To all these missionaries, of different tongues and nationalities, the vast majority of whom have already passed on to their Father's house to receive the reward of faithful servants, is due the gratitude of the Rector Major and of the entire Congregation!

As I said in the homily at the Mass inaugurating the centenary celebrations at New Delhi on 28 February 2005, "We cannot fail to be struck by the enormous expansion of Don Bosco's charism, of the flourishing of vocations, of the development of the Salesian Family to the point that enables us to declare that the Congregation now has an Indian countenance. It is true, and it is of this Indian and South-Asian countenance that I want to speak to you in the pages that follow.

## 1. A great dream fulfilled

The story of Salesian activity in the Region has roots that go back a long way. Already in 1875 Don Bosco had spoken of India as one of the possible countries to which he could send missionaries at some future time.<sup>1</sup> A year later he mentioned Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) among future mission fields.<sup>2</sup> In the same year Pius IX

<sup>1</sup> Cf. MB XI, p. 383.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. MB XII, p. 224.

offered Don Bosco a Vicariate in India, and the following year again we find Don Bosco writing to Don Cagliero: "*We are going to take on the Vicariate Apostolic of Mengador (Mangalore)*" and he thought of Don Cagliero as its possible Vicar Apostolic.<sup>3</sup> Finally, during the night of 9-10 April 1886, Don Bosco had his missionary dream at Barcelona, which "he related to Don Rua and others in a voice at times choked by sobs".

Don Bosco "saw a vast crowd of boys who ran toward him crying: 'We've been waiting for you. We've been waiting for you so long. Now at last you're here. You're among us and you won't get away from us.' (...) While he was standing there, dazed in their midst, gazing at them, he saw an immense flock of lambs led by a shepherdess. After she had separated the boys from the sheep, she set one group to one side and the other to the opposite side. She stopped in front of Don Bosco to whom she said: 'Do you see what's before you?' 'Yes, I do', Don Bosco answered. 'Good, do you recall the dream you had when you were ten year's old?' Then she summoned the boys to Don Bosco's side telling him and them: 'Look into the distance as far as you can see. What is written there?' One boy read "*Valparaiso*", another "*Santiago*", others "*Peking*". Then the shepherdess, who seemed to be the boys' teacher, said: 'Now draw a line from one end to the other, from Peking to Santiago' and – speaking now to Don Bosco she went on: 'Here you see ten other centres between the middle of Africa and Peking. And these centres will provide missionaries for all the neighbouring countries. There is Hong Kong, there is Calcutta... These places, and later others too, will have houses, study centres and novitiates'."<sup>4</sup>

And so, when I look back on the huge numbers of youngsters I have met in various events in India, I remember the words of the boys addressed to Don Bosco in the dream: "*We've been waiting for you, we've been waiting for you so long. Now at last you're here. You're among us and you won't get away from us!*" And with

<sup>3</sup> Cf. MB XIII, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> MB XVIII, pp. 50-52.

gratitude I have seen them fulfilled. And so our work in Asia, and especially in southern Asia, was foreseen by Don Bosco, plainly shown to him by the heavenly shepherdess as part of the Congregation's future; what we are seeing today is the fulfilment of that dream.

The bishops of the Patronage (Padroado) of Mylapore in southern India were the immediate instruments chosen by God to bring the Salesians to the Region. From 1896 Mgr. Antonio de Souza Barroso several times asked Don Rua to send Salesians to work in his diocese. His successor was Bishop Teotonio Manuel Ribeiro Vieira de Castro, a great admirer of Don Bosco. As a young priest he had met Don Bosco in Turin in 1885 and had received his blessing. Consequently, when he became Bishop of Mylapore he very much wanted to have Salesians in his diocese, and from 1901 wrote frequently to Don Rua asking for them. Finally Don Rua agreed to send them, provided that certain conditions could be met (concerned mainly with expenses, the place of residence, and maintenance). A formal agreement was drawn up and signed in Turin by Mgr. Manuel de Castro and Don Rua on 19 December 1904. It was agreed that Salesians would be sent to Thanjavur, which at that time formed part of the diocese of Mylapore, to take over an already existing orphanage, and a trade-school. And so it happened that on 5 January 1906 the first group of five Salesians led by Fr George Tomatis, arrived in India.

## **2. The Region of South Asia**

Until the GC25 South Asia was part of the Asian Region, and later of that of Australasia. Because of the continued growth in the number of both Salesians and foundations, the CG25 divided the Region into two: East Asia-Oceania and South Asia. Today South Asia includes nine Provinces and the Vice-Province of Konkan in India, the Vice-Provinces of Myanmar and of Sri Lanka, and the communities and foundations in the Andaman Islands

(belonging to the Chennai Province) in Nepal (belonging to the Kolkata Province, in Yemen (belonging to the Bangalore Province) and Kuwait (which belongs to the Province of Mumbai).

At the beginning of the twentieth century at the time of the arrival of the Salesians, India, Burma (now Myanmar) and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) were British Colonies, while Kuwait was a British Protectorate. India gained independence in August 1947, Myanmar in January 1948, Sri Lanka in February 1948 and Kuwait in September 1961. Nepal had been an independent country from the second part of the eighteenth century.

### **Political, social and religious situation**

Because of the far-flung nature of the Region and of the diversity in cultures and languages of its component countries we shall consider each country separately.

#### ***India***

Geographically India is situated between Myanmar and Pakistan, in the southern part of Asia with boundaries extending from the Arabian Sea to the Gulf of Bengal.

India's original inhabitants were the Dravidians, whose civilisation was one of the oldest in the world, going back at least 5,000 years. About the year 1500 BC, groups of Arians invaded the Indian subcontinent from the north-west, and their fusion with the original inhabitants gave rise to the classical Indian culture of the present day.

Later the Indian territory witnessed regular incursions by Arabs, Turks and European traders until finally, during the nineteenth century Great Britain assumed political control over almost the whole of Indian territory. Prolonged resistance to British colonialism eventually led to independence in 1947.

With independence, the subcontinent was divided into two: the secular State of India and the smaller Muslim State of Pakistan. A war between the two countries in 1971 resulted in East Pakistan becoming a separate nation, called Bangladesh.

Successive waves of foreign invaders left an indelible mark on the culture of the Indian subcontinent. Of the total population, some 72% is of Indo-Aryan origin with 25% of Dravidian. A considerable number of the inhabitants are identified as *Dalits*. These are placed under the heading of “*scheduled castes*” by the Indian government and are able to enjoy certain social benefits. And there are finally various tribes that are listed as “*scheduled tribes*”.

The Hindu religion (*dharma*) contemplates four castes in hierarchical order: the *Brahmins* (the priestly caste), the *Kshatriya* (the princely class), the *Vaishya* (the commercial class), and the *Sudra* (the working class). The members of these main castes oppressed different groups of the original inhabitants, and reduced them to a class without caste at all, the *Dalits*, the *Pariahs*. During and after the struggle for independence there was a strong reaction to this unjust situation, and today both government and Church do a great deal for the wellbeing of the “casteless” group. We have made specific mention of this group because some 70% of Indian Christians belong to the *Dalits* and in some of our Indian Provinces they constitute the main subjects and beneficiaries of our apostolate.

Today, India is the biggest democracy in the world and the country with the second highest population (1,095,351,995), of whom 80.5% are Hindus, 12.4% Muslims, and 2.3% Christians. Within the country can be found enormous differences between rich and poor. The literacy index is only 59.5%. The official language is Hindi, while English enjoys the position of a national language. In addition there are 14 other official languages, each with its own script, and 200 other non-official languages, to say nothing of thousands of dialects. The overall result is that India is a veritable mosaic of tongues, cultures and traditions, which all contribute to a disconcerting complexity and a unique richness.

After the parliamentary elections of May 2004, there was a change of government from an ultra-nationalist, exclusively Hindu ideology to a more moderate centre-left coalition with the external support of the communist party. Not infrequently inter-religious conflicts break out (mainly between Hindus and Muslims). Direct or indirect persecution of the Christians also continues with an occasional violent incident. Here must be mentioned the promulgation in some states of a law against conversions, which prohibits the so-called forced conversion from one religion to another. But the real underlying motive behind the law is to prevent those of lower caste and the above-mentioned tribes from becoming Christians. Many times Church spokesmen have clarified matters, i.e. that of its very nature conversion cannot be forced, and there are no forced conversions in the Church.

At a political level there has been a longstanding conflict between India and Pakistan over the question of Kashmir; three times it has erupted into war between the two countries, and even to the brink of a nuclear conflict. Recently, however, there seems to be less tension and a greater openness to dialogue, which leads to the impression that the situation is improving.

Over the last ten years, more or less, globalisation has reached India to a remarkable degree. The next ten years will see India becoming an economic superpower with all the associated evils such as consumerism, materialism and an ever widening gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The Indian population is still prevalently rural and agricultural, even though at the present time development is taking place in a vast range of modern industries and a multiplicity of services which foster economic growth. India is able to take advantage of the large number of well instructed people, all competent in the English language, which will enable it to become a leading exporter of services and high level technical software. The enormous and still increasing population is at the same time its main resource in terms of human capital, together with pressing social and economic problems, made still more difficult by the widespread caste system, especially in rural areas.

The origins of Christianity can be traced back to St Thomas the Apostle in 52 AD; the Syro-Malabaric Church claims descent from St Thomas himself. A great impulse was given by the arrival of St Francis Xavier in 1542 and by the missionary work of the Jesuits. After their suppression in 1776 the foreign missionaries of Paris (M.E.P.) took their place and did much work in evangelisation. A part of the Jacobites group (which centuries earlier had left the Catholic Church due to the excessive Latinizing policy of the Portuguese missionaries), returned to full communion with the Roman Catholic Church in 1930. Thus, besides the Latin Rite Church, there are two other Catholic Churches in full communion with Rome. The Syro-Malabar Church and the Syro-Malankara Churches are headed by their own Major Archbishops; the Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church is also a Cardinal. At present, in India there are three Cardinals in office, one of whom (Ivan Cardinal Dias of Mumbai) has been recently appointed Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples.

There are over 24 million Christians in India (2.3% of the total population), of which Catholics form 1.98 %. There are 21,931 priests (12,207 diocesan and 9,724 religious); consecrated religious number 102,102, of whom 12,802 are men and 89,300 women.<sup>5</sup> 68% of the clergy and the religious come from the South of India, from the States of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Mangalore and Goa. Some of the Syro-Malabar dioceses of Kerala have a high percentage of Catholics (Pala in Kerala has 50.64% of Catholics), while there are dioceses in North India, with less than 0.02% of Catholics.

The Catholic hierarchy was set up in India in 1886; in 1923 the hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Church, and in 1932 that of the Syro-Malankara Church were established. In addition to the National Catholic Bishops' Conference (CBCI), from 1987 onwards there have been three other distinct Bishops' Conferences for the three Catholic Rites (Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Statistical Year Book of the Church 2004*, Secretaria Status, Rationarium Generale Ecclesiae, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006, pp. 174, 205, 212, 221.

The Christian community, and more specifically the Catholic community, is a powerful force in India. Despite being such a tiny minority, the Christians provide 20% of all the primary education in the country, 10% of the literacy and community health care programmes, 25% of the care of orphans and widows, and 30% of the care of the handicapped, lepers and AIDS patients.

The greatest challenge the Church has to face in India is working for the poorest and the oppressed with a clear evangelical vision and witness; and the fostering of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue among the members of the various religions and sects.

### ***Sri Lanka***

Sri Lanka (formerly called Ceylon) is a tropical island-nation, some 31 km. south-east of India. It is in a strategic position in the Indian ocean on the main commercial sea-route between the Far East and Africa and Europe.

Sri Lanka has a history that goes back a very long way; scholars testify that there were human settlements in the island at least 130,000 years ago. A very high percentage of the more than 20 million population is of Indian origin. Among them, the majority (the Sinhalese group) traces its origin thousands of years back, and is considered to be the native people of the country; the Sinhalese form 73,8% of the population, while a smaller group of Tamils from Southern India forms the second biggest group (over 8,5%), living mainly in the northern part of the island.

The civil war between the Sinhalese and the Tamil people, (backed by the Revolutionary Group, LTTE), has caused more than 100,000 deaths in the last two decades; and displaced more than 200,000 Tamils, who sought refuge in the West. The island was very severely affected by the *tsunami* on 26 December 2004, which caused more than 10,000 deaths and enormous damage. Our confreres speedily mobilised resources to bring solace and



comfort to the bereaved, and provided food, shelter and other amenities for the people.

Of the total population, Buddhists account for 69.1%, Muslims 7.6%, Hindus 7.1%, Christians 8% and unspecified groups about 10%.

Already in 1505 Portuguese priests had arrived on the Island, but the real organised work of evangelisation in Sri Lanka began in 1543 and made great progress in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the arrival of various groups of missionaries. Among them was Bl. Joseph Vaz, a priest from Goa. But, during the second half of the same century, when the Island nation came under Dutch rule (1650-1795), evangelisation suffered a serious setback. Later, with the arrival of the British, the situation improved, though various factors continued to be an obstruction to Church activities till the independence of the country in 1948.

The Catholic hierarchy was established in 1886. In 1893 a Pontifical Seminary was opened in Kandy to provide for the priestly training of the clergy from India and Sri Lanka. Later, in 1955, the Pontifical Seminary of Kandy was transferred to Pune in India, and in its place the National Seminary of Our Lady of Sri Lanka was opened in Ampitiva to serve the dioceses of Sri Lanka. Today, the Catholic population stands at 1,365,000 (6.8% of the total); with 11 dioceses, 1,080 priests (683 diocesan and 397 religious) and a total number of 3,038 consecrated religious, 577 men and 2,461 women.<sup>6</sup>

The greatest challenges faced by the Sri Lankan Church are work for reconciliation between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, the resolution of the ethnic problem; and the achievement of greater dialogue with the Buddhists.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## ***Myanmar***

Myanmar (formerly Burma) lies in south-east Asia. Neighbouring countries are China, Laos, Bangladesh and Thailand, and it is bordered by the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. The population of Myanmar is about 48,000,000, of which Buddhists account for 89%, Christians 4%, and Muslims 4%.

Since 1988, a ruthless military government has ruled the country. It does not allow the citizens their human rights: freedom of political self-determination, freedom of the press and freedom of expression. The ethnic groups in the States of Shan, Mon, Karen and Karenni (on the borders of Thailand) are repressed by the Government for military reasons with a systematic plan of "ethnic purification", as it is called.

The origin of the Church in Myanmar can be placed at about the middle of the sixteenth century, and specifically in an attempt at evangelisation in 1544 by a French Franciscan. Almost a hundred years later the Capuchins came, followed by the Barnabites. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as an aftermath to the war between the British and the Burmese, the Church underwent almost total extermination, so much so that in 1866 there were only two Catholic priests remaining. But the situation gradually improved, and the Catholic hierarchy was established in 1995.

Today, Myanmar has a Catholic population of over 620,000 (1.16%); with 13 dioceses, 574 priests (540 diocesan and 34 religious), and 1,627 consecrated religious, of whom 139 are men and 1,488 women.<sup>7</sup>

In 1965/6 the Government nationalised all the ecclesiastical institutions. But despite these obstacles arising from the political situation, the Church is vibrant and dynamic. From 1995, the Myanmar Catholic Bishops' Conference has been pressing for freedom of religion on the basis of the National Constitution.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## *Nepal*

Nepal, a landlocked country in southern Asia, lies in a strategic location between China and India; it is a mountainous country, rising from a height of 70 metres to Mount Everest at 8,850 metres; it has 8 of the world's 10 highest peaks.

Nepal is among the poorest and least developed countries in the world with almost one-third of its population living below the poverty line. Nepal's economic prospects are rather poor due to its technological backwardness, its landlocked situation and remote geographic location, its susceptibility to natural disasters, and above all its internal civil strife, fanned by Maoist guerrillas and a number of left-leaning and radical antimonarchist groups. The precarious situation has also reduced tourism, which in better times was a key source of foreign exchange.

Nepal has a population of 29 million, ruled by a king and a parliament of ministers. The political situation is volatile, if not quite anarchical. A typical example was the massacre of ten members of the royal family, including the king and the queen, in 2001 by the crown prince, who then took his own life. The majority of the Nepal population is Hindu. Conversion to another religion is forbidden by law.

In 1628 the Jesuit missionaries brought the Catholic faith to Nepal, but the work of evangelisation begun by them has greatly diminished. Today, the Catholics number about 8,000 (0,02%), with 50 priests (12 diocesan and 38 religious), 164 consecrated religious, (40 men and 124 women).<sup>8</sup>

Conversion from Hinduism, the national religion, is not only not allowed, but punishable with imprisonment. The Christian mission, in terms of an explicit proclamation of the Gospel, is forbidden.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## ***Kuwait***

Kuwait, a small, oil-rich country, lies in the Middle East, between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, bordering the Persian Gulf. Though rich in petroleum, it depends almost wholly on food imports, and 75% of the drinking water must be distilled or imported.

It has a population of about 2,650,000, including 1,300,000 non-nationals, 85% of whom are Muslim, while the remaining 15% consists of Christians, Hindus, Parsis, and others, almost all expatriates.

The origin of Christianity in the region can be traced back even to apostolic times. At present, of the total population about 158,500 are Catholics (5.98%), belonging to the various rites. There is a Catholic Bishop and a Cathedral in Kuwait City, and three other places of worship, with 12 priests, of whom 9 are religious. Consecrated religious are 22, of whom 13 Sisters.<sup>9</sup>

## ***Yemen***

Yemen is another country in the Middle East, with a population of almost 21,000,000, practically all of whom are Muslim, with a negligible number of Jews, Christians and Hindus. The northern part gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1918, while the British withdrew from the southern part only in 1967. When South Yemen adopted a Marxist stance, thousands of Yemenis from the South took refuge in the North, and the exodus brought the two regions into conflict with each other. Finally in 1990, both regions were merged into the Republic of Yemen. Now the country enjoys comparative harmony.

There are only about 4,000 Catholics in a total population of 21 million, and these too are mostly Filipino and Indian expatriates, with a smattering of Iraqis, Sudanese, Lebanese, Jordanians,

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Americans and British. There are 5 Salesian priests as chaplains to the Missionaries of Charity of Mother Teresa, but they also provide for the spiritual needs of the small Catholic population. There are 4 communities of the Missionaries of Charity of Mother Teresa, with 24 Sisters, belonging to various nationalities. In 1998 three of these Sisters were gunned down by an Islamic fundamentalist; they were the first martyrs of the Missionaries of Charity to lay down their lives for the Faith in the service of the poor. In some of the centres where the Salesians work, formation programmes are conducted to enable the expatriates to withstand the inducements of the Islamic fundamentalists and the Protestant sects. At present the situation is improving after the President in 2000 ordered the Prime Minister to restore the Churches and adjoining lands in Yemen to the Catholic Church.

### **3. Salesian history of the Region**

The first group of Salesians, led by Fr. George Tomatis, was made up of three priests, one cleric, one brother and an aspirant (four Italians, one Belgian and one Frenchman). On 17 December 1905 they set sail from Genoa, and reached Bombay on 5 January the following year. They spent brief periods as guests of the Bishop of Daman, and then of the Bishop of Mylapore, and reached their final missionary destination – Thanjavur – on 14 January 1906.

At once they took charge of the existing orphanage of St. Francis Xavier, and of the parish elementary school. Within three weeks of their arrival they started a group of Salesian Cooperators and a festive oratory, where in the evenings after recreation the boys had an hour of catechism conducted by the new Cooperators and a few of the bigger boys. In February of the same year they started two workshops.

Already by June of 1906 they had administered the first baptism. Right from the start the Salesians had been trying to foster indigenous vocations. In August 1907, a certain Ignatius Muthu,

28 years old, joined the Salesians at Thanjavur. In 1908, along with another aspirant, he was sent to Italy for his novitiate. After completing the novitiate and philosophy in Portugal, the two young Salesians returned to India, and Ignatius Muthu was ordained priest on 31 December 1916. He was the first Indian Salesian priest.

Within the first couple of years of Salesian work in Thanjavur, the untimely death on 19 November 1907 of Fr Ernest Vigneron, one of the first group, gave a rude shock to the Salesian community. God came to their rescue in a mysterious way. Another French missionary, Fr Eugene Mederlet, was on his way to China to join the Salesian missionaries in Macau. On the way, he stopped in India to visit his friend, Fr Vigneron. While he was still in India, his friend died, and Fr Rua telegraphed Fr Mederlet to stay on in India to take his place.

In 1909, Fr Tomatis, leaving Fr Mederlet in charge of the Thanjavur mission, moved to Mylapore (Chennai) to start the second foundation. Here too they began work with orphans in an already existing orphanage at Mylapore. Fr Tomatis died unexpectedly in 1925.

Meanwhile the Holy See was pressing the Salesians to take on the vast mission of Assam. Finally on 13 January 1922, the first group of 11 missionaries (6 priests and 5 brothers), with Fr Louis Mathias as leader, reached Shillong, then the capital of Assam. In December 1922, Fr Mathias was appointed Prefect Apostolic of Assam. and from then on there was no looking back. In 1923 the Salesians in India were grouped into a "Vice-Province" with Shillong as the headquarters, and Fr Mathias as the superior. On 28 May 1926 the Indian "Vice-Province" was elevated to a Province, with Fr Mathias as the first Provincial, Shillong still as the headquarters and St. Thomas the Apostle as the patron.

While the Salesian work was progressing very well in the north, the situation was not so encouraging in the south. There were problems with the local diocesan administration. The local Bishop was very friendly, fatherly and protective towards the

Salesians; not so his Vicar General, who governed the diocese in the long absence of the Bishop in Europe. Hence, the Extraordinary Visitor, Fr Peter Ricaldone, withdrew the Salesians from Thanjavur and Mylapore and sent them to Mumbai and Vellore. In 1928 the North Arcot Mission, which had its headquarters in Vellore, was attached to the Madras Archdiocese, which in its turn was entrusted to the Salesians, and Fr Eugene Mederlet was appointed the Archbishop.

In 1934, Fr Mathias and Fr Ferrando were ordained bishops of Shillong and Krishnagar respectively. In 1935 Archbishop Mederlet died unexpectedly; Bishop Mathias was transferred to the archdiocese of Madras, and Bishop Ferrando to Shillong. In 1939, the Salesians in the north went to Burma (Myanmar) and began the work at Mandalay, and in 1956 those of the south began the work at Negombo, in Sri Lanka.

### 3.1 *Missionary activity in the first half of the century*

From 1922 until the second world war there was a constant flow of Salesian missionaries from abroad, but after the declaration of independence in 1947 it became progressively more difficult for foreign missionaries to enter India and in 1966 the government put a stop to it altogether. And so it was that between 1906 and 1966, a period of 60 years, more than 450 Salesians from different countries came to India as missionaries – the majority of them from Europe and especially from Italy, but also some from Australia and the Americas. The great majority of them died in India, the missionary land of their adoption; a few returned to their native countries for reasons of health or similar motives. Today in India only 31 foreign missionaries remain.

From the very beginning, the missions were an outstanding expression of the Salesian charism among the young. Beginning from the education of the children to arrive at the evangelisation of the local people: this may be said to be the missionary strategy

adopted by the Salesians in all their missions. But the missionary work in India presents certain characteristics of its own that distinguish it from missionary work elsewhere in the Congregation.

In the first place, it must be emphasised that the missionaries were an international group drawn from different countries and so represented the reality of a universal Church. Helpful also was the fact that these missionaries maintained contact with their countries of origin for the financial and psychological support so necessary for the rapid development of the mission. Wherever a Salesian missionary work was begun, there was a transformation, a progressive growth in all the surrounding area.

The presence too of a sizeable number of Salesian brothers, working alongside the priests in every kind of skilled work, made a very favourable impression because it spoke of the fundamental equality of people in a country dominated by divisions of tribe and caste, and where every caste is linked with a specific kind of work. The role of the Salesian brother in the missions has been decisive because of the quality and depth of his lay witness.

In this way the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments go hand in hand with education and professional work. The network of schools, of professional training centres, of boarding schools and hostels for boys and girls which everywhere sprang up rapidly in missionary territory, had a deep transforming effect on a society which had long been stagnant and isolated, and opened it up to the vast world all about it by giving credible witness to the power of the Gospel and its wide social implications.

A second characteristic of missionary work in India was that of the formation of missionaries on the spot. Mgr. Mathias insisted with the superiors that they send young candidates to India, where they could begin their novitiate and pass their formative years in the places of their future ministry, learning the language, customs and traditions of the local people they would have to serve. Their youthful zeal and energy enabled them to adapt very rapidly to the local conditions and later to be exceptional leaders and pio-



neers in the areas to which they were assigned. Combined with this option for young missionaries from abroad, there was also the effort from the outset to find indigenous vocations. This courageous option, which was in contrast to the custom prevailing elsewhere of counting exclusively on missionaries from abroad, proved to be wise and far-sighted, because it prepared Indian Salesians who grew and worked shoulder to shoulder with confreres from other countries to take over the reins of government and administration when foreign missionaries were interned in concentration camps during the war, or could no longer enter the country after the declaration of independence. Missionary work did not come to a halt when the influx of foreign missionaries dried up. It continued, but in different hands, long schooled by the spirit and zeal of the first pioneers.

The third significant characteristic of missionary strategy in India, we could say, was the foundation of missionary institutes of Sisters by Salesian bishops. The Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, the Catechist Sisters of Mary Immaculate, the Visitation Sisters of Don Bosco, and other institutes founded more recently, made available to the young churches of the north-east zealous groups of dedicated local Sisters, who went round villages and small communities catechising, attending to health needs, and in general taking care of the women and young children. In mission stations, in dispensaries, schools and hostels, these good Sisters integrated wonderfully with the work of the priests and brothers in far-flung corners of the missionary field.

Mention must also be made of the intrepid groups of lay catechists found all over the missions. Even in the most distant villages and those most difficult of access, which the priests and sisters could reach only once or twice a year, these humble catechists, though only poorly instructed and poorly paid, were the visible countenance of the Church, gathering the people together for prayer every Sunday, teaching them, visiting the sick, preparing the faithful for the reception of the sacraments, accompanying missionaries on the occasion of their visits, translating sermons

into local languages, and making first contacts in new areas. The missionary Churches owe a great deal to these poor and simple catechists, who are in the vanguard of the missionary outreach *ad gentes*.

From only 5,000 Catholics in Assam when our first missionaries arrived in the north-east of India and took over the Assam mission from the Salvatorian Fathers, the Catholic Church has grown to 1.3 million faithful today in the space of little more than 80 years.

And what I have said of missionary activity in the north-east could equally be said of the other parts of the Region in their own way.

### 3.2 *Two great missionaries*

Here I must digress from the historical narrative, to pay homage to two very important missionaries, to whose missionary zeal, enthusiasm, administrative skill and vision, the planting and development of the Salesian charism can be attributed. During my recent visits to the Region I heard them spoken of with great respect and esteem.

#### *Archbishop Louis Mathias (1887-1965)*

The first is Fr Louis Mathias, the leader of the first missionary expedition to North India, a French Salesian and a very dynamic individual. He is unquestionably the most prominent Salesian in India of the last century.

From the start he put into action what would later become the official motto of his episcopate, "*Aude et spera*", dare and hope. Daring and hoping against all odds, his stewardship as the first Provincial of India saw the number of Salesians and activities grow rapidly.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cfr Thekkedath, J. *A History of the Salesians of Don Bosco in India*, Vol. II, pp. 1368-1375.

Fr Mathias was not merely an enthusiastic leader, but also a person who was able to arouse the same enthusiasm in others. He showed great resourcefulness in overcoming the serious problems that the new mission of Assam faced because of the lack of sufficient means and personnel. One of his great achievements in Assam was the creation and maintenance of the "family spirit", especially in the formation houses. He was a great organizer: the brain behind all the planning in the mission; he was also in control of everything everywhere; but he left ample room for local initiative, so that the missionaries did not feel stifled, but sustained. Fr Ricaldone, the Extraordinary Visitor in 1927, described him as one who "possessed extraordinary qualities for his office. He was intelligent: he knew how to get the support of others. But above all, he was a man of piety and of exemplary religious observance". Thanks to his great love for Don Bosco, he took effective steps to plant the Congregation not only in Assam but also in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, North Arcot and Krishnagar. The progress of the Assam Mission under his inspiring leadership was such that the Holy See made Shillong a diocese in 1934 and appointed him its first bishop.

In the same year, however, on the death of the Salesian Archbishop of Madras, he was transferred to Madras to take his place. Madras was a different world altogether, but he adapted himself to the new situation. When the Holy See combined the Archdiocese of Madras and the Diocese of Mylapore to form the new Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore, he was appointed as its first Archbishop. During his thirty years in Madras he proved himself to be one of the most energetic of the bishops of India. Whenever the principles or interests of the Church were under attack from the government in any part of India, he raised his voice in protest and often with success. It is rightly said that the hierarchy, clergy and laity in India are deeply indebted to him for his enormous services to the Church. The work he did in the archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore is simply monumental.

He always remained a staunch son of Don Bosco. He was extremely generous towards the Congregation. Some of the best

Salesian parishes and schools of Madras city (now Chennai) are gifts of Archbishop Mathias to the Congregation.

*Fr José Carreño (1905-1986)*

The second very significant Salesian, who left a deep mark on South India, is Fr José Carreño, a Spaniard. If Mgr. Mathias was the most prominent Salesian in India during the last century, Fr Carreño was the most loved Salesian in South India during the same century.<sup>11</sup>

After the Salesians were forced to leave Thanjavur, North Arcot became the field of our apostolate and Tirupattur in North Arcot was the heart of the Salesian world of South India. Fr Carreño made this heart throb with love of Jesus Christ. It is said that as a director of novices, to which post he was appointed when he was not even thirty years old, he made his novices fall in love with the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

I reproduce here two letters of his novices, as they give a clear picture of Fr Carreño. The first is from Hubert D’Rosario, who later became the Archbishop of Shillong-Guwahati. *“My Novice Master was Fr Carreño. He cared for us as a father ... We felt attracted to him and tried to imitate him. He inculcated in us lasting values ... He was a brilliant teacher, a convincing preacher ... We were always eager to listen to his lectures and conferences that he used to prepare so well. We were won over by his fatherly heart. Joy, love, peace and hope were the things one breathed in that house ... That house was like heaven”*.<sup>12</sup>

The second testimony is from Fr Aloysius Di Fiore, who later became the Provincial of Madras: *“Without a doubt the most precious legacy that Fr Carreño handed on to us was the Salesian spirit in its essential characteristics: thirst for souls, fraternal charity, family spirit built on prayer, work, cheerfulness, healthy optimism, hospitality”*.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 1375-1379

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1375.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1375-1376.

In 1944 Fr Carreño was appointed Provincial of the Southern Province, and in the first council meeting a decision was taken to consecrate the Province to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Many Salesians of South India attribute the extraordinary growth of the Southern Province to his love for the Sacred Heart and his consecration of the Province to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The most outstanding contribution of Fr Carreño to Salesian India was the effort that he made to increase the number of native candidates to Salesian life. Already in 1893, Pope Leo XIII had written, "*...the Christian cause in India could never have firm roots without the continuing dedication of a pious and zealous clergy native to India*".<sup>14</sup> Fr Carreño would have heartily concurred with the Pope as regards native vocations to the Salesian life.

With the start of World War II, the flow of personnel from Europe stopped. To make matters worse, the Italian and German Salesians were interned in concentration camps, and the Province was left with very few Salesians. Fr Carreño opened an aspirantate at Tirupattur in 1943. First, he took in only youngsters who had finished high school, but realising that they were too few for the great work ahead, he began to take also younger boys. That policy has continued to the present day in India, and today, if the Indian Salesians are so numerous, it is due to the farsightedness and courage of Fr Carreño.

### 3.3 *Rapid development of the Congregation*

In 1923 the Indian "Vice Province" was set up, with Shillong as its headquarters; on 28 May 1926 it was elevated to a Province, with St. Thomas the Apostle as the Patron. On 24 January 1934 the Salesian Province of India was divided in two: the Province of North India, with St. John Bosco as the patron and Shillong as headquarters – later moved to Calcutta (Kolkata); and the Province of South India, with St. Thomas the Apostle as the pa-

<sup>14</sup> Leo XIII, *Ad Extremas*, no. 4, 24 June 1893.

tron and Vellore as headquarters – later transferred to Madras (Chennai).

On 17 October 1959 the Province of Guwahati with Mary Help of Christians as the patroness was separated from Kolkata. On 31 January 1972 the “Vice Province” of Mumbai was erected into a Province with St. Francis Xavier as its patron. On 19 March 1979 Bangalore Province with the Sacred Heart of Jesus as its patron was separated from Chennai Province, while on 8 December 1981 Dimapur Province was separated from Guwahati with St. Francis de Sales as its patron. On 24 April 1992 Hyderabad, then part of Bangalore Province, was established as a separate Province, with St. Joseph as its patron, while the Delegation of New Delhi, which was part of Kolkata Province, was canonically erected as a Province in its own right on 24 January 1997, with Jesus the Good Shepherd as the patron. On 5 August 1999 the Chennai province was divided into two, and the southern part was formed into a Province with Our Lady of Good Health as the patron, and Tiruchy as the headquarters. In 2004 three existing Delegations were raised to the status of Vice-Provinces: that of Myanmar, separated from Chennai, with Mary Help of Christians as patroness on 6 August, that of Sri Lanka separated from Chennai, with St. Joseph as patron, on 15 August, and that of the Konkani Region, separated from Mumbai, with Blessed José Vaz as patron on 31 August.

### *Salesians in Myanmar*

In 1894, a certain Fr J. L. Lafon had founded an orphanage for Chinese children in Mandalay, which he developed into a much larger one for orphans of all nationalities found in Burma, and later also added a school. With the continued growth of the school and the boarding provision, and his advancing age, Fr Lafon could not manage the work alone. Since 1928 he had been writing to Mgr Mathias, the Provincial, with the approval of Bishop Falière, asking for Salesians to take over the school. Finally, in 1939, a group of six Salesians, with Fr Anthony Alessi as the leader, came to Mandalay to take over the boarding school.

As often happens in beginnings, in Myanmar too the Salesians had a very difficult time – especially lack of funds. Soon afterwards Mandalay became a battle zone between the Japanese and the British. In the fighting, the Salesians lost practically all their belongings; but thanks be to God, no life was lost. They also gave shelter to many people - including 10 seminarians, orphans and refugee families. After the war, they slowly limped back to normal life, with the help of the British authorities. But soon again a civil war broke out within Myanmar itself, and this time, too, the Salesians had to suffer greatly.

In 1952 the Salesians accepted the parish of Thingangyung, about 5 km from Yangon. In 1957 the aspirantate was opened in Anisakan, and in 1964 the first group of three novices began their novitiate at Anisakan; after their profession they continued their post-novitiate formation in the same house. With the Socialist Revolution of 1965, all foreign missionaries were driven out and private schools were nationalised. Only Fr Fortunato Giacomini, an Italian missionary managed to stay on, and keep the newly professed together, acting as their superior, professor of philosophy and theology, all in one.

In 1975, the mission of Lashio was opened, thanks to the missionary zeal of Mgr. Jocelyn Madden, and continued to flourish well to the point that it became a diocese, with Mgr. Charles Bo as the first Salesian Bishop. In 1977 the formation house of Yangon was started for the students of theology who frequented the inter-diocesan Major Seminary. In 1988 the aspirantate of Hsipaw, and the mission of Wa States were begun.

All this while, Myanmar formed part of the Province of Kolkata. In 1964 it was made a Delegation with its own Delegate. Realising the importance of helping the Myanmar Delegation to grow, and seeing the steady though slow growth in the number of the confreres and the regular number of pre-novices and novices, the possibility of overall development of the region, the esteem and encouragement given to the Salesians by the bishops of the

region, and above all the unflagging fidelity and attachment of the confreres to Don Bosco, especially during the years of trials and difficulties, in 2002 the Rector Major decided to raise the Delegation of Myanmar to a Vice-Province, and officially erected it as such on 13 June 2004.

### *Salesians in Sri Lanka*

Fr Henry Remery, a French Salesian of the Chennai province, began the Salesian work on the island in 1956 near the capital city of Colombo, and in 1962 an institution was opened at Ettukal-Negombo. Although the work progressed at a steady pace, Fr Remery was alone for many years because the Sri Lankan government would not allow Indians to enter the country.

For some time, young confreres from Sri Lanka were sent to India for their initial formation, but that too stopped due to political reasons. Consequently a centre of formation was started in 1976 at Kandy for the young confreres studying for the priesthood, and at present, there are several formation houses in Sri Lanka itself – an aspirantate, a pre-novitiate, a novitiate and a post-novitiate. For theological studies the candidates are sent to Salesian studentates of theology in India or elsewhere.

In 1993, Sri Lanka became a delegation of the Chennai Province. Within a decade the Delegation had an almost complete infra-structure for animation and administration, and for further development and growth. In 2003, the Provincial of Chennai, with the consent of his council and in consultation with the Delegate of Sri Lanka, made a request to the Rector Major that the Delegation be separated from the Chennai province and be erected into a Vice-Province. Thus, the Vice-Province of Sri Lanka was canonically erected on 13 June 2004.

### *Salesians in Nepal*

Salesian activity in Nepal began in 1992. Fr Anthony Sharma, SJ., the Prefect Apostolic, bought a piece of land at Dharan and invited the Salesians to look after the mission, which consisted of



about 300 Catholics or 93 families of the locality and the 6 neighbouring centres. The Salesians began a school in 2000 in Kathmandu, the capital city. At present we have a community and a foundation in Nepal, belonging to the Kolkata province, with two confreres on loan from the Bangalore Province.

### *Salesians in Kuwait*

Salesian work in Kuwait started in 2000 when the Rector Major, Fr Juan Vecchi, entrusted Kuwait to the Salesians of the Mumbai Province, to start a school for the children of mainly those engaged in building work, most of whom are of Indian or Filipino origin.

### *Salesians in Yemen*

Mother Teresa of Kolkata was asked by the Yemenese Government to start a foundation in the country to look after the aged and the abandoned. She agreed to the proposal on the condition that her Sisters would have a chaplain to care for their spiritual needs. When the Government agreed to her request, she turned to the Rector Major, Fr Viganò for help, and Fr Viganò asked the Bangalore Province to send Salesians to be Chaplains to the Sisters of Mother Teresa in Yemen.

The first Salesian fondation was set up in 1987 in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen; similar chaplaincy work was started also in other places, in 1988 in Hodeidah, in 1989 in Taiz and in 1991 in Aden. In all the centres, besides being the official chaplains of the Sisters of Charity, the Salesians are also looking after sizeable groups of Catholics, mostly expatriate workers.

## **4. Salesian work at the present day**

Today, the South Asian Region has 9 provinces and 3 Vice-Provinces; with about 2,400 Salesians and 170 novices in 359 cen-

tres; of these, 270 are canonically erected houses and 89 others approved foundations not yet canonically erected. The confreres in the Region include 5 Archbishops and 6 Bishops. The average age of the confreres is 40.3 years. Moreover many missionaries from India have gone out to various parts of the world to spread the Gospel and to plant the Salesian charism. The tiny seed sown on Indian soil a hundred years ago, has grown into a large tree, producing fruits of missionary activity and evangelisation the world over.

#### **4.1 *Interprovincial coordination***

There is a well established inter-provincial Conference with its own Statutes; it meets twice a year – once for the plenary session, and the other for the executive meeting. The Salesian Provincial Conference of South Asia (SPCSA) has its centre in New Delhi, and acts as an instrument of inter-provincial communication and collaboration, and also of animation and public relations. The Secretary of the Conference is in charge of the centre and sees to the publication of the biennial bulletin (SPCSA Bulletin).

Under the responsibility of the Conference are four inter-provincial commissions, headed by their respective inter-provincial Delegates, who are appointed by the Conference and coordinate the four main sectors of our apostolate: formation, youth ministry, Salesian Family & social communication, and missionary animation. The Regional Conference draws up a plan for the six year period, based on the plan of government and animation of the Rector Major and his Council. So too, each of the four inter-provincial commissions makes its own programme based on the same model. There is adequate interaction among the commissions, and they meet regularly. Their activities are closely followed up by the Conference with annual evaluation and approval of programmes and budgets, and by providing for their financial expenses. The difficulty however lies in forging a common vision of the Region and in

committing adequate personnel and finance for achieving and sustaining significant regionwide works and activities.

## 4.2 *Formation*

### *Ongoing formation*

At the inter-provincial level the Regional Conference has set up an on-going formation centre at Bangalore, *Don Bosco Yuva Prachodini*, and staffed it with qualified Salesians from different Provinces. Regular renewal programmes are conducted for leaders of communities, formation personnel and animators of youth pastoral ministry, both for Salesians and other religious. It runs a month-long course, culminating in a spiritual retreat, for deacons from all Provinces before ordination and also a course for confreres preparing for perpetual profession.

### *Initial formation*

More than forty percent of the Salesians of the Region are in initial formation. This is a fact that we acknowledge with joy and with thanksgiving, but it is also a call for responsibility in assuring the high quality of formation fundamental for the Region's future.

There are two studentates of theology in the Region, both aggregated to the theological faculty of UPS. The one in the south (Kristu Jyoti College, Bangalore) offers a specialisation in catechetics and youth ministry (*Viswadeep*), conferring a baccalaureate in theology, and a licentiate in theology, youth ministry and faith education; since 1984 it publishes a quarterly journal entitled *Kristu Jyoti*. The second one is in the north (Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong), with a specialisation in missiology. Since 1979 a missiological journal, dealing with theological issues connected with the Church's mission in contemporary Indian society, is published from here; in 2000 the journal was renamed *Mission*

*Today.* These studentates of theology and of specialisations are also open to men and women religious of other Congregations.

There are also four study centres, from where the Salesian students of theology frequent seminaries run by other religious or the diocese. This year we have altogether 206 students of theology. Last year there were 44 priestly ordinations. The Sacred Heart Theological College of Shillong also runs a centre for the specific formation of brothers; the course lasts two years with a diploma from the UPS, and is open to other men and women religious.

The Region has nine post-novitiate houses, one of which, run by the Kolkata province, is meant exclusively for brothers. The one in Nashik in the Mumbai Province is aggregated to the philosophical faculty of the UPS and publishes a quarterly journal, *Divyadaan*, of a scholarly nature. All the post-novitiate houses have adequate infra-structures, good libraries and dedicated formation staff, though in some there is a lack of sufficient qualified teachers; in this, they are helped by other Provinces that have qualified personnel. Four of the studentates are also affiliated to State universities for Bachelor degrees. The students in the post-novitiates total 295. After philosophical studies, the young Salesians do their practical training or continue with further academic or professional training. This year, 84 of them from the Region made their perpetual profession.

There are nine novitiate houses in the Region. 138 novices made their first profession on 24 May 2006, while 171 novices entered the novitiate on the same day. There are 10 pre-novitiate houses, which supply a well-prepared group of novices every year. We may note, besides, that in the Region there are only 163 Salesian brothers, compared with 2,247 priests and clerics. The ratio is 1 brother to 14 priests and clerics.

There are also some other aspects that seem to need strengthening as, for example, the formation of the formation personnel, which implies the setting up of a serious and specific programme of Salesian formation, with solid courses of Salesianity in the

various phases of formation with suitable texts and qualified teachers, and the "Curatorium" to ensure the sound functioning of formation houses open to students from different Provinces. One must start from the awareness that formation is first and foremost the responsibility of the whole Congregation as such, which has the prime responsibility for ensuring the charismatic identity of the Salesians.

### 4.3 *Youth ministry*

Pastoral ministry to young people is well organised. At Regional level there is a Delegate for youth animation appointed by the Provincial Conference. He is also the Delegate for education and culture for the Region. In addition, each Province has its own delegate assisted by commissions and sub-commissions for youth pastoral ministry in its five dimensions. Most of these commissions function effectively in organising programmes in schools, youth centres and parishes. Most Provinces have also drawn up an Educative and Pastoral Plan, which they try to implement. In general, there is tendency to emphasise activities and initiatives rather than formation and progressive animation. There is need for better planning and a more unified youth pastoral ministry.

### *Educational Institutions*

The Salesian apostolate for the benefit of young people in the Region takes various forms. The most important one, with the largest number of beneficiaries is education. Speaking about the educational scenario in India, I had already pointed out that Christians are responsible for 20% of the institutes of primary education in India. We can also say that Salesians play a significant role in the educational endeavour of the country through their various educational institutions.

The early missionaries took their mission of evangelising though educating very seriously, and their missionary work was always

linked with education. The focus in all Provinces was on schools, primary and secondary, academic and professional, because basic education was the most fundamental need of young people. Soon, however, the Salesians also started university colleges. As a matter of fact, the first university college of the Congregation, St Anthony's College, was started in Shillong in the Province of Guwahati, in 1934. Now, there are colleges also in other parts of the Region, and these confer graduate and post-graduate degrees. With basic education becoming more widespread and accessible, there is currently a shift of emphasis from primary education to higher education, and hence, a greater need is felt in the various Provinces to open more university colleges.

In the major cities, our schools and colleges find it difficult to cope with the requests for admission. So great is the demand for good quality education that classes are conducted in two shifts, morning and afternoon in schools and with day and evening courses in colleges. In the Region there are in all 196 schools and university colleges, with a student body of 230,375 students. These educational institutions are known and respected for the good standard of discipline, an all-round education and excellent results. If Don Bosco is generally known and respected all over India, it is largely because of the network of solid educational institutions that we have in the country.

Many youngsters, however, cannot attend regular schools or colleges for various reasons: lack of finance, part-time jobs, over-age, lack of places in formal institutions, etc. To help these young people in difficulty, many Provinces conduct night schools, evening study centres, correspondence courses and open university coaching centres. These are greatly appreciated, well attended, and the results are very encouraging.

There is also the fact of unemployment, which is a serious problem. Although India is experiencing an economic boom, jobs are scarce and hard to find. Education alone is not sufficient preparation for a decent job in the future. Vocational training and

agricultural institutions are needed to equip young people with the required skills. The Salesians of the Region have taken the matter seriously to heart. There are 85 vocational training centres and 2 agricultural institutes in the Region, catering for 14,030 students. Among them, we have engineering colleges and institutes providing training in computer sciences, as well as those providing technical and vocational training for the skilled workforce. In both these categories, besides those institutions that provide formal education, there are also many which provide education of a non-formal kind to students who do not qualify for admission to formal institutions. This too is a great help in reducing unemployment.

### *Boarding Houses and Hostels*

Along with the educational institutes, mention must be made of boarding houses and hostels as relevant means of youth apostolate. The boarding houses are for schoolchildren from various backgrounds: children from villages where there are no schools, children from homes without even the minimum facilities for study, and children who are orphaned or from broken families; this kind of boarding house, especially in mission and poverty-stricken areas, is a means of evangelising and inculcating Christian values to Christians and non-Christians alike, and of imparting a good education. Hostels are usually meant for college students and young working-men, both of which are considered to be a relevant means of apostolate and of imparting Christian values. There are 214 hostels and boarding houses in the region, catering for a total of 20,440 young people.

### *Youth Centres*

In all the Provinces of the Region there are festive or daily oratories, which in the Region are generally known as youth centres. There are 168 such centres, frequented by almost 59,000 youngsters (more boys than girls), with varying regularity in their attendance. Most of them are attached to Salesian schools or

parishes. It is true that earlier there was a higher average attendance; but the number of the youth centres is still on the increase, and the methods of animation and programmes are also being updated. The oratories / youth centres of Shillong, Panaji, Chennai and Kochi have a long history and experience behind them and continue to make a profound impact on the neighbourhood, while the more recent centres in Guwahati, Ranchi, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Tiruchy offer a variety of services for young people, and perhaps have a wider outreach.

Groups and movements for young people have not had much success in the Region, even though *Friends* as a youth group continued for some time. Scouting, however, has drawn much attention in very many schools, and every three years a Scout Jamboree, called *Boscoree*, is conducted by Provinces in turn, and draws more than two thousand young scouts and guides from all over India. The event is meticulously prepared for a year with an *iter* and a theme, and celebrated in grand style with elements of India's multi-cultural folklore. The experience is both fun-filled and formative, a typical mix of Salesian youth spirituality in a pluralistic religious context.

### *The apostolate on behalf of Youth at Risk (YaR)*

For the past few decades the confreres of the South Asian Region have gone a long way in their efforts on behalf of youth at risk (YaR). The youth at risk are youngsters very similar to the shoeshine boys, and the children of war victims of Italy in the aftermath of the Second World War. The confreres involved in this work are doing a typically Salesian apostolate; and deserve every support, appreciation and help.

The term "youth at risk" is used to include many groups of youngsters, both boys and girls. The first among them are the so-called *street children*. In the major cities of India there are thousands of boys and girls who literally live on the streets. Many of them do not have a home, or parents; others run away from home



and go around the city gathering recyclable stuff from dust bins (*rag pickers*). Some of them work as unlicensed porters in the railway stations and bus stands. Since they are under the control of gang-leaders, a good percentage of their daily earnings is compulsorily handed over to their bosses. The rag pickers are often harassed by the police and sometimes sexually abused by older persons, and the girls are forced into prostitution. They take shelter under bridges, in unused drain pipes or in abandoned sheds.

The work on behalf of these street children was begun by an enterprising group of students of theology in Bangalore, in the year 1980. Today it has fired Salesian hearts with enthusiasm in practically all the Provinces of India. These children are provided with a home, where they feel they belong and are cared for. The names given to these homes are revealing: *Sneha Bhavan*, *Valsalya Bhavan* and *Anbu Illam* (all meaning "Home of Love"), *Asha Alayam* (Dwelling of Hope), Shelter Don Bosco, Don Bosco *Veedu* (Don Bosco's House), etc. In many cities of India, in the railway stations and main bus terminals, with the help of the municipal authorities, the Salesians have set up a toll free telephone network called *Child Line*. Through this facility, any youngster in distress, or any one noticing a youngster in trouble, can call a specified number and contact the Salesians of the locality and seek help.

Another group of young people at risk are child labourers, both boys and girls. The Indian Constitution decrees compulsory education for all till the age of 14, and the employment of children under 14 years of age is punishable by law; yet, thousands of children are employed even as early as 5 years of age. Thus, we have a very large group of child labourers in the cities and towns. The Salesians intervene on behalf of these children, often with the help of the police, rescue them from the clutches of employers, bring them to rehabilitation centres, and with the help of the educational department, coach them in their studies and place them in the school system according to their age.

In some Provinces of the Region, Salesians are active on behalf of drug addicts, especially juvenile addicts, and help to de-toxify and rehabilitate them into social life. Some members of the Salesian Family help to rescue young girls from prostitution, and provide assistance for so-called "sex workers". Very significant in this area is the rehabilitation by the Salesians in Sri Lanka of young victims of sexual abuse arising from the sexual tourism of foreigners in that island.

At the SPCSA Centre in New Delhi a forum has been set up to address the needs of the young at risk, with a Salesian attached to it full time. Several Salesians and members of the Salesian Family are trained to work with young people at risk. In all, there are 207 centres in the region where the young at risk find shelter daily, or which serve as rehabilitation centres for them. About 34,000 youngsters of this category are helped every year in different ways.

### *Career Guidance Services*

Practically in all the Provinces of the Region there are special youth services: career guidance services, and psychological counselling centres. These centres or services operate on the Provincial level, with qualified personnel.

There are 33 such centres assisting a sizeable number of youngsters, of which *Vazhikaatti* in Chennai and Tiruchy Provinces are notable for preparing young people for employment.

### *Vocational guidance*

In general, each Province has a vocation promotion plan, and a vocation promoter. The overall selection process of the candidates through interviews and camps is quite sound, and as a result we usually get good vocations.

Nevertheless, since the recruitment of boys is done in their teens, there is also a good percentage of dropouts from Salesian life during the period of initial formation. It is also noticeable

that most of the vocations come from outside our parishes and schools. Although we are in daily contact with thousands of young people who frequent our institutions, we have not yet found the way to attract a good number of them to the Salesian way of life. What is lacking, perhaps, is a good vocation guidance plan at the local level, whereby each community and confrere feels the responsibility for the discernment and guidance of those youngsters who show signs of a vocation, and through prayer, the radiant witness of the consecrated life and an evangelising presence among the young, sow the seed of a Salesian vocation in their hearts.

By *apostolic schools and aspirantates* are meant those boarding houses attached to schools and junior colleges, where prospective candidates for the Salesian priesthood or religious life are looked after and prepared for the pre-novitiate. The Region is blessed with 26 such flourishing centres, true nurseries of Salesian life for hundreds of budding Salesian vocations every year.

Concluding this survey of the institutions for the benefit of the young, it must be said that if youth pastoral ministry in the Region is to be more effective and enduring, it must be more unified and centred to a greater extent on the primary objective of the education of young people to the faith; it must accompany the growth process of the youngsters and not merely multiply activities; it must be better planned and coordinated, so as to involve lay collaborators in a common vision and shared commitment. In any case the Salesian preferential option for poor youngsters has found outstanding and creative expressions throughout the Region, and of this it can be justly proud.

#### 4.4 *The Salesian Family*

In speaking of the Salesian Family in the Region, pride of place must be given to the *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA)*, who have worked and continue to work with the Salesians for the

development of the Salesian charism and mission. Their presence in India goes back to 1922 when Fr Tomatis on his return to India after his holiday in Italy, brought back with him six Salesian Sisters. Originally they worked side by side with the Salesians practically everywhere, mainly looking after the girls and poor women. They had successive groups coming regularly from Europe, and they too began recruiting local vocations, with the result that gradually the Institute became stronger and enriched by Indian Sisters. They too had to face the same problems and privations as the Salesians during the Second World War, and later were subject to the same restrictions placed on the arrival of foreign missionaries. Today in the Region, there are 1,208 professed Sisters and 80 novices, not counting the 11 Sisters and 5 novices in Myanmar in 2 communities belonging to the Cambodia Province. The FMA Region is divided into 6 Provinces and has 150 centres.

Soon after their arrival in Thanjavur, the Salesians realised they needed lay collaborators for their missionary work. Within three weeks, Fr Tomatis started a group of the *Association of Salesian Cooperators* in Thanjavur. In this past century, wherever they went, both Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were zealous in starting up a centre of the Cooperators. Especially after the impetus given by Vatican II towards the lay apostolate, and after "the rediscovery of the Salesian Family" by the Special General Chapter, the Salesian Cooperators have grown in number in the Region, with a clearer and better understanding of their Salesian vocation, their indispensable role in the Salesian mission and their rightful place in the Salesian Family and in the Church. As of today, there are 133 centres in the Region and 2,507 Cooperators who have made their promise. The local centres are animated by SDB/FMA delegates and at Provincial and Inter-provincial level by a joint council of the SDB/FMA centres and their delegates,

Practically everywhere in India *Don Bosco/FMA Past Pupils* are to be found. Many of them occupy important positions in society and in government offices. In a few States some influential Minis-

ters are Past Pupils. There are 102 active centres of Don Bosco Past Pupils and 26,025 enrolled members in the Association.

The number of *Don Bosco Volunteers* is very small; less than a dozen, and all of them in the Provinces of Chennai and Kolkata. The DBV Group in South Asia still needs to be given a fresh start.

In the Region there are some other groups of the Salesian Family, founded by Salesians:

- The *Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC)*, founded by the Servant of God, Archbishop Stephen Ferrando of Shillong, in 1942, in Guwahati Province. What led him to found this group was the fact that during the Second World War foreign missionaries were interned in camps and the work of evangelisation had begun to slow down. While he was planning to involve women as evangelisers in the villages, he noted a group of FMA past pupils in Guwahati helping people in general and caring for the wounded soldiers. They wanted to become religious and dedicate their life to charitable works. Archbishop Ferrando founded the Institute on this group. Now numbering 931 Sisters in 156 communities, they work in 48 dioceses in India, Italy, Africa and Brazil. Most of them do evangelising work in the villages, and others run schools, oratories, orphanages, homes for the aged and free clinics.
- The *Catechist Sisters of Mary Immaculate Help of Christians (SMI)* were founded by Bishop Louis LaRavoire Morrow in 1948 in Krishnagar, in the Kolkata Province. Their spirituality is based on that of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and the preventive system of Don Bosco. Maintaining close contact with families is one of their chief apostolic activities, besides running oratories, primary schools, work centres, homes for the aged, etc. They number over 500, and have communities also outside India.

These two Congregations of religious women are officially members of the Salesian Family, while others are waiting to be recognised and accepted. Among the latter are:

- *The Disciples (Don Bosco Secular Institute)*, founded by Fr. Joe D'Souza of the New Delhi Province in 1973, are a group of men and women. The 313 Sisters and the 87 Brothers work in 194 centres in 46 dioceses (41 Indian and 5 Italian). Like the disciples who were sent out two by two by the Master, these too work in small groups, carrying the Gospel message to the people and living like the disciples of old, owning no property, neither land nor institutions, but living among the people and, like the people, accepting whatever food and lodging is offered them. In each diocese they are under the care of the local Bishop.
- *The Sisters of Maria Auxiliatrix (SMA)*, founded by the late Fr Anthony Muthamthoil in 1976; the members number 91, in 21 communities, working in 7 dioceses of India. Their apostolate ranges from direct evangelisation to caring for street children. In many places they help the Salesians in their apostolate.
- *The Visitation Sisters of Don Bosco (VSDB)*, founded by Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario of Shillong in 1983, in the Guwahati Province; today they number 81 professed religious and 17 novices, and work in 15 communities in 4 dioceses of North-East India. Their main apostolate is evangelisation through home visits, mainly in the villages and through social development programmes.
- *The Missionary Society of St. Paul*, founded by Archbishop Charles Bo of Yangon, in 1990. It has two branches: the male branch, known as *Missionary Brothers of St. Paul*, consists of 2 priests, other professed members and 2 novices working in 6 communities and in 3 dioceses; the female branch is known as *Missionary Sisters of St. Paul* and has 74 professed members and 12 novices, working in 22 communities and 5 dioceses.
- *The Adoration Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*, founded by Archbishop Lucas Sirkar in 1991, when he was Bishop of Krishnagar. They number 60 professed Sisters and 11 Novices, and work in 6 communities and 2 dioceses. As their name suggests, their main apostolate is perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. They also engage in any apostolic activity the Bishop asks of them.

Practically all the Provinces have a Salesian as Delegate for the Salesian Family. In some Provinces the SDB and FMA Provincial Councils hold joint meetings to share ideas about the common mission, to plan combined initiatives and celebrate the “Salesian Family Day” once a year.

#### 4.5 *Social communication*

Faced with the vast area of the Indian subcontinent, with its huge population, great variety of languages, and the utter strangeness of its cultures and customs, the first missionaries began the laborious task of learning several languages: English, the language spoken by the Government and the Indian elite, and also the local language of the common people they were meant to serve. But the more daunting task was understanding and inculturating themselves in a context so very different from Christian Europe.

The Salesians in the Region used all the means Don Bosco used to win souls and to spread Gospel values – lively classrooms with stories and quizzes on educational and catechetical subjects were combined with games, sport, music, drama and picnics. Barely seven years after their arrival, a full brass band was set up at Mylapore.<sup>15</sup> In Mumbai, the band was found to be an “effective means of propaganda”.<sup>16</sup> In Goa, a Portuguese colony, work began with football and an oratory.<sup>17</sup> In Thanjavur more than 30,000 people, most of them Hindus, flocked to see the passion play.<sup>18</sup> The new Salesian environment brought to India new signs and symbols that signified Christian joy and optimism.

In short, they created a “communicative environment” in which Gospel values could be transmitted, and the Salesian charism could be implanted. At the root of their communicative potential lay the

<sup>15</sup> Thekkedath, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Thekkedath, p. 271.

<sup>17</sup> Thekkedath, p. 720.

<sup>18</sup> Thekkedath, p. 65.

stirrings of pastoral zeal. It enabled them to reach beyond their own limitations. Some of the Salesians picked up the local languages so well that they became outstanding promoters of the local culture, producing grammars and books in the vernacular.<sup>19</sup>

Major communication initiatives soon began with the opening of printing presses as early as 1922 in Shillong (in the same year that the Salesians arrived in Assam), in 1924 in Tanjore, in 1925 in Calcutta and in 1948 in Tiruppattur. There are at least 8 of these in the Region, which, besides producing good literature, also aim at equipping young men with professional printing skills. The beginning of the Cultural Centre at Vaduthala in 1975 and the Catechetical Centre at Kolkata in 1977 gave an impulse to the production of catechetical and audio-visual aids. There are now about a dozen publishing houses, and cultural and communication centres in the Region with different names and in different languages, each with their respective goals: Mumbai province has two such centres, Kolkata has one, Guwahati three, Bangalore two, Chennai two and Tiruchy one. Besides publishing books, these centres also produce magazines, audio-video cassettes and audio-visual aids.

In 1930 the Salesians began a magazine called *Don Bosco in India*. From 1951, the *Salesian Bulletin* was printed in India, though from 1976 it was called *Don Bosco Salesian Bulletin*. Today, in addition to the English edition, the *Salesian Bulletin* is published in 6 local languages. There were about 20 publications in the Region when Mgr. Mathias began the publication of *The Clergy Monthly* in 1937, but most of them later ceased publication for various reasons. Today there is only one, in Tamil, called *Arumbu*, with a circulation of 20,000 copies.

From 1933 a Provincial newsletter was published for the whole of Salesian India. The creation of new Provinces gave rise to more newsletters, and today 11 of the 12 circumscriptions have their own

<sup>19</sup> Cf, Sebastian Karotemprel (ed.), *The Catholic Church in Northeast India, 1890-1990*, Shillong, Vendrame Institute, 1993, p. 503.



newsletters. In addition, organisations and institutions in the Region also produce their own newsletters for their specific audiences. The Region is not lacking in the publication of scholarly works either, mainly by the two theologates of Bangalore and Shillong.

Catechetical aids and religious publications, audio and video productions, radio and TV programmes and films, have all been regularly produced. Worthy of mention are: *Catechetics India*, published quarterly, *Johnny*, a feature film in Malayalam on the early life of Don Bosco, released in 1994, and its sequel *Bosco* in 1999, both of which have been dubbed into English and some Indian languages.

The work of bringing young people to a critical use of the media through media education has gained ground. Some Salesians in rural ministry use folk-media to prompt the oppressed people in remote villages to fight for their dignity and rights. Here again, worthy of mention is the low budget film, *Mathia*, in the Kokborok language, which won an international award for its social value.

Graduate courses in the communication media at St Anthony's College Shillong (Province of Guwahati) and Don Bosco College, Angadikadavu (Province of Bangalore) were established to offer a wide range of professional training in the media and information technology. The contribution of the Salesians to social communication in the Church and society has been recognised in the fact that two Salesians were elected Presidents of SIGNIS-INDIA and the ICPA (Indian Catholic Press Association).

A decisive turning point in the communication field took place in March 1993, when the Salesian Provincial Conference set up BOSCOM-INDIA, a national executive body to coordinate communication initiatives in the Provinces. Most significant among these were two productions completed in view of the new millennium: an experimental formation plan for Salesians in social communication entitled, *Shepherds for an Information Age*, and *Don Bosco Multimedia India*, the first combined national catalogue of all Salesian production centres in India.

However encouraging this progress in social communication may seem, Salesian initiatives in South Asia are only a drop in the ocean of the vast and complex media scene.<sup>20</sup> The challenge is to make '*Da mihi animas*' the basis of every Provincial and Regional communication project, to search for relevance and efficiency in the local context, while at the same time to be open to sharing and synergy within the wider South Asian Region and indeed with the rest of the Salesian world. This will demand from the Salesians a closer collaboration with lay experts from different cultures and religious backgrounds in the South Asian world.

#### 4.6 *Missionary activity*

Indian Salesians followed the same aims and options as the first missionaries who brought to India the Salesian charism. Because of the vocation recruitment strategy of the early missionaries (especially Fr Carreño) many young men from various parts of the country joined the ranks of the Salesians, and carried on from where the foreigners left off. The Government action that stopped the flow of foreign missionaries into India by no means diminished the missionary impetus and activities of earlier times. The Indian confreres kept up the pace with the same zeal, courage and optimism.

The superiors (ecclesiastical and Salesian) found them well-formed and ready to shoulder responsibilities of animation and leadership at the diocesan, provincial and local levels. Today, all the 10 Archbishops and Bishops and 12 Superiors of the juridical circumscriptions are of native origin; so too are practically all local superiors.

<sup>20</sup> The figures in India alone are staggering: 55,780 newspapers, a government-run radio network of 213 broadcasting centres that broadcasts in 24 languages and 146 dialects; a film industry that is the largest in the world, with an average of 880 feature films and 1200 short films released in a year.

Just as the earlier missionaries encouraged and fostered Indian vocations, the Indian confreres themselves have nurtured local vocations. Thus, even those States which did not have many local vocations during the first half of the century, like Karnataka in the South and the States of Central and Northeast India, are now reaping an abundant harvest of candidates, especially from the tribal and adivasi groups. Some of the Northern and North-eastern Provinces no longer depend on the Southern States for vocations, as once they did.

The story of evangelisation and the *missio ad gentes* still continues steadily and surely, without a lot of publication for fear of misunderstanding and obstacles from fundamentalist elements. Against the criticism that the Salesian missions have destroyed the rich tribal cultures of the area, leaving no trace, we have the magnificent *Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures* in Shillong where, in 13 galleries, are preserved and displayed various artefacts and traditional products from all the tribes of the Northeast. With a specialised library of about 10,000 volumes, the Centre offers facilities for research, seminars and symposia on the tribal cultures of the Northeast and the cultural development of the people.

Another very consoling aspect of the missionary activity of the Region is that after receiving overseas missionaries for about six decades, it is now paying back the debt that it owes to the Church and the Congregation. Since 1980 the Region has been sending missionaries to other parts of the world to plant the Gospel and to spread Don Bosco's charism. When Fr Viganò launched "Project Africa" 25 years ago, the Region responded very positively to his appeal. The East African Circumscription, first as a Delegation and later as a Province, has always been headed by Indian Salesians, and today 65 Indian Salesians work there as missionaries; some have returned to India for various reasons, and one was killed and another one died in East Africa itself. Another 16 work in other Provinces of Africa, 16 in the East Asian Region, 4 in the Region of Italy and the Middle East, and in other European countries, and 3 in South America. Thus, the total number of mission-

aries of the Region working abroad is 107,<sup>21</sup> including the 24 who were given to me as a Centenary Gift.

*The Arunachal Mission* deserves special mention in the missionary activity of the Region. Arunachal Pradesh is one of the Indian States, on the north-eastern extremity of India, bordering on China. Its population is completely tribal, and the population has lived for centuries in virtual ignorance, superstition, extreme poverty, oblivion and isolation, oppressed by unhealthy social customs and cut off from the rest of the world. The Salesians of the North-east are the pioneers in bringing the Christian faith and education to this beautiful land and its people.

The Indian Government had passed a law that no missionary could enter Arunachal Pradesh, on the pretext that the culture of the tribes should be preserved uncontaminated. The education and eventual evangelisation of Arunachal began in 1978, when a certain Mr Wanglat Lowangcha, the young headman of one of the tribes, came to Shillong looking for a school to send their youngsters. There he met Fr Thomas Menamparampil (the present Archbishop of Guwahati), who received the young people very warmly and their friendship paved the way for a visit of Fr Thomas to Arunachal within a few months. That visit could have ended tragically, since the jeep in which he was travelling collided with that of a military convoy. Fr Thomas was injured, and as he was recovering in the house of Wanglat, the tribal chief asked Fr Thomas to baptise him and his family. That tragic night turned into a dawn of a very glorious era for the people of Arunachal.

The report of the encounter and the clandestine baptism of the tribal chief spread quickly in the province of Guwahati (at present

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<sup>21</sup> One of those working in South America, Fr George Puthenpura, has founded a Religious Congregation for women, called the "Sisters of the Resurrection". The official foundation was in 1987 and they were accepted into the Salesian Family in 2004. With their motto, "Christ is Risen, let us also rise with Him", they preach the Word, inculturate the Gospel and teach the faith to the poor through catechetics.

Dimapur and Guwahati) and the Salesians threw wide the doors of their schools to the tribal youth of Arunachal. When the students returned home for the holidays, their own people were surprised to see their children educated and well-instructed. This led them to send more of their children to Catholic schools; and finally they themselves embraced Catholicism and received baptism. Wanglat became an apostle to his own people. One year after his baptism he prepared 600 people of his village for baptism. The Government would not permit the Salesian Bishop, Mgr. Robert Kerketta, and others to enter the area, but the people stood firm and forced the authorities to permit the entry of the missionaries into their territory.

More and more youngsters came to study in our schools, and returned as apostles and evangelisers to their own people. The process has continued and finally today, after a quarter of a century, the Church is well established in Arunachal Pradesh with two dioceses, one of which has a Salesian as its bishop. Education was the powerful means for bringing this people into the light!

### *Parishes*

Most of the missionary work carried out by the Salesians of the Region during the last century has been through parishes. To them were attached mission stations, some of which in the early days were at a distance of many days' journey on foot. In some mission areas of Assam the missionary took a full year to visit all the villages and mission stations. In the parish centre, there was generally a school and boarding hostel for boys, run by the Salesians, and another for girls looked after by Sisters. Thus through the parish and school the work of evangelisation and education of the people and of the children was given a certain systematic and consistent nature.

Gradually, these mission stations grew and became full-fledged parishes with a variety of services, and later developed into dioceses as the numbers of the faithful grew. Today we have a total

number of 207 parishes and mission centres, serving the spiritual needs of 705,530 faithful.

*Social development programme as an integral part of missionary activity*

In the pluri-religious social set up of India, direct evangelisation and missionary work are not always possible. Social development programmes are in some areas the only possible method of evangelisation.

Another reason why great importance is given to social development programmes in the Region is because the vast majority of the population of India live in underdeveloped conditions. Education, which is the beginning of development and growth (on the individual and collective levels), is often lacking, especially in rural areas. In addition, there are other pressing social issues that the missionary must address if he wishes to make his evangelising work meaningful and relevant for the people – issues such as economic poverty, the unjust distribution of wealth, the oppression of the poor by the rich and the powerful, etc.

The Salesians of the Region have taken up such issues with competence and evangelical vision; and are resolved to defend the oppressed, the down-trodden and the exploited, the ignorant and the uneducated. In every Province of the Region many Salesians and a team of qualified personnel conduct programmes and allocate money and manpower to the achievement of these aims. They are fully supported by the Province – with development offices well equipped and staffed by qualified personnel, both Salesian and lay; the projects are financed by local funds, and to a great extent by the Rector Major and foreign agencies which collect funds for peoples in need.

In the Region there are at least 138 social developmental works and those benefitting number about 800,000 individuals of various categories and with different needs. Significant among these initiatives for the social improvement of the poor are the *Bosco Reach*

*Out network in the Northeast, the Bosco Gramin Vikas Kendra in Ahmednagar District in the Mumbai Province, the Peoples' Action for Rural Awakening in Andhra Pradesh, the Peoples' Movement in the Jawadhi Hills in Chennai Province, and the Fishermen Community Development Programme in Kollam in Bangalore Province. One cannot fail to mention the tremendous relief work done by the Salesians in Sri Lanka, and in the coastal areas of Chennai and Tiruchy Provinces in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami of December 2004, and the patient work of rehabilitating the fisherfolk and the orphans displaced by the disastrous tidal wave.*

## 5. Holiness of the first missionaries

A real implanting of the charism implies the emergence of fruits of holiness. Here I want to recall two confreres who took seriously their vocation to be missionaries, and their calling to holiness; their names are among the Servants of God of our Society.

### *Archbishop Stephen Ferrando (1895-1978)*

Stephen Ferrando was born on 28 September 1895, into a very religious family of Rossigliano, in the Province of Genoa. Later he would say, "From my family I received the rich heritage of a great love for God and the Madonna, a spirit of sacrifice and a jovial nature".<sup>22</sup> Soon after his first profession in 1912, when asked by the superiors about his choice of a future apostolate, he unhesitatingly chose to be a missionary. After his military service in the war, having received medals and certificates for his courage and valour, he was ordained priest in 1923. His missionary dream was fulfilled when he was allowed to leave for India with eight young novices and a cleric. He reached Shillong on 22 December of that year.

Once he reached the land of his missionary dream, his missionary zeal knew no bounds. At first he was made *socius*, then director of novices and rector of the house of studies. During this time

he had also to stand in for the Prefect Apostolic, Mgr. Mathias, in his absence. Even while holding these responsibilities, he was a missionary at heart and did not miss a chance to visit villages and preach the Gospel.

In 1934 he was consecrated Bishop of Krishnagar, and in 1935 was transferred to Shillong. His episcopal motto was "Apostle of Christ". As an apostle of Christ, he toured the mission areas and villages widely on foot, as far as his health would permit. He used to tell his priests, "You cannot run about in vehicles to convert souls; to approach people and solve their problems you should go walking",<sup>23</sup> and walk he did even as a Bishop, for miles and miles in search of souls. After the example of the Apostle of the Gentiles, he made himself all things to all people, learned the languages of his people and picked up their customs and manners so as to understand their ethos and to preach Christ to them more effectively.

He was Bishop of Shillong for 35 long years, and developed the diocese well. Often he used to pray: "Lord, as the Shepherd of the flock, I offer my life as a sacrifice for the good of the sheep, the salvation of the souls entrusted to my care". The Lord indeed heard his prayer and blessed his diocese of Shillong. Today it has grown into 3 Archdioceses and 10 dioceses in the North East of India.

With the same apostolic zeal, he nurtured local vocations and founded the religious Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, about which we spoke earlier. He was known and appreciated for his simplicity, joviality and, above all, for his holiness. He died in 1978 and was originally buried in his family tomb in Rossiglione. Later, acceding to his desire that his bones be buried in the soil of the Khasi hills, they were re-interred in the Convent Chapel of the Mother House of the Sisters. In 1998 his cause for beatification and canonisation was introduced.

<sup>22</sup> J.Puthenkalam & A.Mampra, *Sanctity in the Salesian Family*, p. 529.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.



*Fr Francis Convertini (1898-1976)*

Francis Convertini was born in 1898 in the mountain village of Papariello, in the Province of Brindisi in Italy. He lost his father when he was hardly two months old, and his mother, after remarriage, also died when Francis was only eleven. Orphaned, he was looked after by his step-father. He worked as a hired servant in two peasant families, who were kind to him. He learned to read and write, fell in love with a girl and agreed to marry her in due time. After military service during the war and dissatisfied with the work of a farmer, he found work as a clerk and was posted to Turin.

Turin was the turning point. On entering the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians for confession, he met Fr. Amadei, who bluntly asked him, "Would you like to become a missionary?" For a while he forgot the incident, but later he again met Fr. Amadei, and finally did decide to become a missionary. He plucked up courage and explained the situation to his girl friend.

He joined the Mgr. Cagliero Missionary Aspirantate of Ivrea, where he had to study along with classmates eleven years his junior. He was not clever, but the desire to be a missionary spurred him on. One of his teachers remarked "Francis learned more on his knees than sitting in the study hall",<sup>24</sup> such was his love for the Eucharistic Lord, in whose presence he spent long periods in prayer.

In 1927 he received the clerical habit from Fr. Philip Rinaldi, the Rector Major, who had earlier assigned him to the missions of Assam. Once in Assam, he made his novitiate, undertook studies for the priesthood and he was ordained in 1935. During his formation years, he had picked up a smattering of Khasi, the language spoken in Shillong. After ordination he was sent down to Krishnagar and, poor as he was in learning languages, he had to pick up a new one, Bengali. He never learned Bengali sufficiently to be

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 551.

able to converse easily, and much less to preach eloquent Sunday homilies. But the people loved him for his simplicity and took to him very easily. They appreciated his sermons, given in broken Bengali, because they saw the conviction with which he spoke. They understood that the preacher was a messenger as well as a living example of the message he preached.

Fr Convertini won souls for Christ through prayer, preaching and sacrifice. Making himself one with the Indian people, he rejoiced when India won Independence in 1947, and mourned with them at the death of Mahatma Gandhi. Though Italian by birth, he was an Indian in heart, and applied for and obtained Indian citizenship. From the Bishop and priests to sisters and lay people - everyone sought him as a confessor, for all found in him an embodiment of God's mercy. His poverty was proverbial; born poor, poor by vocation and choice, he remained poor like his people, and often went about barefoot.

He was a friend to all, great and small, rich and poor. After coming in contact with the simplicity of Fr. Convertini, some important people in Bengal became Catholics; others were impressed by him and called him "a prophet and a saint"; others were "fascinated by the way he made the sign of the cross", while still others said, "the very presence of this holy priest was an inspiration".<sup>25</sup>

Exhausted by work, and afflicted by many ailments, he breathed his last on 11 February 1976. Everyone who knew Fr. Convertini could testify that he was a living witness of the Gospel that he preached. The cause of his beatification was officially introduced in 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 558-559.

## 6. The major challenges of the Region

The Region of South Asia is pulsating with millions of youngsters who are trying to build a better future for themselves, and are at the same time endowed with rich human resources, talents, energy and creativity. It is a vast and promising field for the Salesian mission.

The first hundred years of Salesian work and activity in the Region have seen an abundant flourishing of initiatives and works which are well in tune with the various pressing needs of the young and the poor. The future presents a serious challenge and prospects are very encouraging, provided that the Salesians are faithful to their own Salesian charism and to those to whom their mission is directed: if evangelisation is the main challenge, the first step to meet it will be to live out the Gospel at both personal and community level.

### 6.1 *Giving God to the young, the absolute priority*

The cultural climate of the Region breathes of God. The soul of India, of Sri Lanka and of Myanmar is deeply religious. Even when apparently crushed beneath grinding poverty, the rigid divisions of the caste system and many other social contradictions, the millenary search for God is deep and tireless. Despite the many forms of suffering caused by the lack of material goods essential to life, there is a still more intense hunger for an experience of God. And when there appears upon the scene an authentically religious person the soul of the people responds at once. Think for instance of the impact made on the people of the Indian subcontinent by a Mahatma Gandhi or a Mother Teresa.

And so the most effective offering the Salesians of the Region can make to the young and the poor is to give them God, by disclosing to them his true name and countenance in the person of Jesus Christ through the witness of their own personal and com-

munity lives. Hence the need to give absolute priority to God and to keep alive the zeal for God and the young. “Like Don Bosco, we are all called to be educators to the faith at every opportunity. Our highest knowledge therefore is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery” (C 34).

This means that our every activity should be clearly aimed at the evangelisation of the young and their education to the faith. It is a matter of being clear about who we are, where we stand and what we want to do for young people. Our Constitutions express this in no uncertain terms: “We walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the risen Lord, and so discover in him and in his Gospel the deepest meaning of their own existence, and thus grow into new men” (C 34).

## **6.2 *Zealous living of the mission “ad gentes”***

Mission does not mean simply activities, initiatives, works and structures. It is first of all zeal for the salvation of the young, a passion that has its source “in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father” (C 11). It is the passion that resounded in the heart of Don Bosco, the secret driving force in the depths of his very being which gave life and energy to all he said or did. He lived and breathed *Da mihi animas* with every fibre of his being. The motto summed up in a wonderful way the essence of his spirituality. The same zeal for the salvation of the young filled the hearts of the first missionaries, and prompted them to do incredible things which explain the amazing growth and variety of Salesian works in the Region.

As is natural in a multireligious context, this process is delicate and fraught with difficulties, especially in certain situations and areas where it could be easily misunderstood as proselytism. But that should not deter us, because it is the inalienable right of every person to know God and his Son Jesus Christ, but without detri-

ment to his own freedom. Nor can this be simply an improvised process. In a multireligious context like that of South Asia, evangelisation and education to the faith must be planned with care, and carried out diligently with firmness, specific objectives, strategies and courses of action appropriate to each situation and context. In this area – it must be admitted, dear confreres – we still have a lot of work to do and we need to be capable of imagination and creativity.

All this means that missionary zeal, which is the concrete expression of the apostolic passion inherent in *Da mihi animas*, must continue without pause. Far from allowing us to take it more easily with the passing of time, rather we must intensify our efforts and grow still further. We cannot simply rest on the laurels of a glorious past. Christ has still to be proclaimed, the Gospel to be preached and the Church and the Salesian charism to be planted in many more places and the hearts of young people who are awaiting the Good News. *The love of Christ drives us on* (2 Cor 5,14) to spread the Gospel.

In the past hundred years the Region has received a great deal through intrepid missionaries, men of great human calibre and undoubted holiness. Now it must do for the Salesian mission in the world what was done by Italian and European missionaries in the first hundred years of the Congregation in India, that is it must fill the world with young missionaries who are zealous and courageous, and who feel the *missio ad gentes* as an apostolic task they cannot but take up. South Asia then, open your eyes and your heart, widen your horizons and send personnel to the most distant mission fields of the Region and of the world itself. Salesian missions the world over feel this need today more than ever before! I feel deeply moved when I find missionaries from this Region already working in different parts of the world, particularly in Africa where they are writing golden pages in missionary annals. But in all sincerity I believe that more can be done, and I ask for it with urgency. South Asia can and must remain missionary! This is precisely its hour, because it is strong in spirit, rich in apostolic

enthusiasm and blessed with so many young vocations. In the name of the Congregation and of the young people of the world I say to you: "We are waiting for you; come among us. You cannot get away from us".

### **6.3 *Strengthening the common life***

The Salesian charism gives rise to a fraternal apostolic life that Don Bosco summed up in three elements: living and working *in unum locum, in unum spiritum, in unum agendi finem* (SGC 498). Our Constitutions have translated this idea into an obligation: "To live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation" (C 49). Today the need is felt for help to be given to Salesian communities to realise to a deeper extent this style of common life and presence among the young in a way that will overcome individualism, activism and narrowness of outlook.

Keeping communities consistent in number and quality is a task that cannot be overlooked; in fact it guarantees our educative presence among the young and the evangelising effectiveness of the apostolic mission. This requires from the administration at Provincial level the achievement of a balance between the expansion and the consolidation of our works. Salesians cannot and must not feel themselves responsible for providing a response to all the needs of poor youngsters, even though they be urgent; effective ministry is not to be identified with multiplicity of efforts, but with the quality of the service provided. For this reason, the number of confreres in the individual communities must be geared to the complexity of the common apostolic mission.

In the multiethnic and pluricultural context that characterises the South Asia Region, the presence of apostolic communities, that bear clear testimony to fraternity and to sincere mutual acceptance and esteem, fosters the implanting of the Gospel and the social healing of society. The building of fraternal communities is

already an act of evangelisation, and a most effective means for spreading the Gospel today. Therefore a form of fraternal life must be ensured in the communities that avoids any kind of discrimination. Any inequality, be it deliberate or merely suffered in silence, would do harm to the force of our witness and put evangelisation at risk.

Communities therefore, whether they be provincial or local, in which there is a marked diversity of culture, ethnic origins or castes, should be encouraged to study and adopt procedures and initiatives to help the confreres to face, assess and overcome possible misunderstandings and unease. It may even be necessary to deal with these questions at Regional level for a better discernment and the reaching of common decisions accepted throughout the Region.

#### 6.4 *Preserving the charismatic identity of the confreres*

With the growing numbers, formation is indispensable for maintaining and deepening the charismatic identity; it remains a crucial point for ensuring that growth is not only in numbers but above all in quality. Formation, both initial and ongoing, must keep alive the spirit, zeal and missionary driving force which is characteristic of the Region today. We have need of Salesians of quality, Salesians with a strong charismatic identity, Salesians inflamed with apostolic zeal.

Formation must be directed in the first place to firing up and keeping alive and effective the apostolic ardour of *Da mihi animas* in its two aspects: zeal for God and zeal for the young and the poor. Without this flame in the heart we are useless, without objective or driving force, at the mercy of every whim and caprice, with no clear idea of where we are going. This twofold zeal is in the first place a gift of God, given in embryo together with the Salesian vocation. But this initial gift carries with it a responsibility and a task: that of keeping the flame burning, of making it grow, of keep-

ing it always bright and shining. This is the main task of initial and ongoing formation: to see to it that the apostolic ardour of *Da mihi animas* becomes the centre, the synthesis, the focal point of our existence, the heart of our spirituality.

Formation of this kind, for it to be real, must be deeply inculturated, that is, rooted first of all in the Gospel, lived in the light of the Salesian charism, but rooted none the less in the culture, traditions and ethos of the people we are called to serve. Through the Salesians of South Asia Don Bosco must acquire a countenance that is Indian, Burmese, Nepalese and Singhalese. The Gospel and the Salesian charism must put down strong roots, so as to grow and flourish. That means learning the language, assimilating the culture, adopting the healthy traditions of the people, and especially of the young and the poor.

At the same time we must be aware, and act accordingly, that no culture is an absolute, ancient and noble though it may be. Like every human element it has its limitations and its defects, which may sometimes be serious. Every culture needs to be purified and perfected by the Gospel. It must be open to other cultures; if it remains closed in on itself, it becomes stagnant, withers away and dies. If on the other hand it opens itself up to other cultures and interacts with them, it acquires fresh vigour and flourishes.

A formation that lasts all life long, taken up as a personal project and lived in the community, helps us to keep our feet firmly on the ground and implanted in the social and cultural reality of the local people, but in such a way as to keep the mind open to all that is good and true, wherever it may be found, and leading us – as the saying goes nowadays – to think globally but act locally.

There is still much to be done! South Asia cannot just rest on its laurels, contemplating its glorious past. The centenary celebrations must prompt us to look further ahead, to advance the great mission of the Lord and the dream of Don Bosco in the Region.



May God, through the motherly assistance of Mary and the intercession of Don Bosco, bless this noble task and make it flourish for his glory and the salvation of the young!

With heartfelt good wishes,

*Pascual Chávez V.*  
Fr Pascual Chávez V.  
*Rector Major*