



Rt. Rev. ORESTES MARENGO

S.D.B., D.D.

Born : 29.08.1906

Ordained Priest : 02.04.1932

Apost. Adm. of Tura : 1973-1979

Professed : 21.01.1925

Consecrated Bishop : 27.12.1951

Died : 30.07.1998



EARLY LIFE

Emilio Orestes Marengo was born to Lorenzo Marengo and Agostina Montaldo on 29 August 1906 at Le Cecche near Diano d'Alba, in the province of Cuneo in North Italy. He was the eldest of the five children that the couple had. One of his sisters, Maria Agnese, became a nun in the Congregation of Sisters of Charity of St. Mary and a brother, Giuseppe, a diocesan priest. He had his early education in the school run by the Salesian Sisters. From 1919 to 1923 he studied at Valdoco, the Mother House of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Here he volunteered for the Ecuadorian missions in South America but his request was turned down.

On 2 December 1923 he sailed on "The Tevere" for Assam taking the place of another boy who had died suddenly. The group led by Fr. Ferrando arrived in Bombay on the 18 December. After his novitiate under Frs. De Ponti and Stephen Ferrando, he was professed as a Salesian on 21 January 1925. He did his studies at Our Lady's House, Shillong and later at Bandel. As a young religious he taught at Guwahati and at St. Anthony's School, Shillong. He was ordained a priest on 2 April 1932 by Most Rev. Perrier, the Archbishop of Calcutta.

Soon after his ordination he was appointed at Guwahati. He assisted Fr. Scuderi in running the orphanage, the secondary school and in touring the vast area under their care. In the following year, he was sent to Dibrugarh. He succeeded Fr. Scuderi in 1934 as the rector of the Guwahati house. He could now completely dedicate himself to missionary apostolate touring extensively the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara in Assam. It was at this time that he toured areas inhabited by Bodos together with a catechist called Gendra. He also prepared the first prayer book and Catechism in Bodo. From 1936 to 1945 Fr. Marengo worked as novice master.

In 1945 he succeeded Fr. Pianazzi as the Rector of the Salesian College at Sonada. In 1947 he returned to Assam as in-charge of the entire Nowgong district which included the Mikir Hills. In 1948 together with Fr. Attilio Colussi he entered

Manipur to see the possibilities of starting missionary work among the tribal populations there. They were the first Catholic priests to visit Manipur. In 1949 he received into the Church 27 Karbi Protestants along with their leader John Kathar. In 1951 Fr. Marengo returned to his native country after 28 years to be ordained Bishop. He was consecrated Bishop of Dibrugarh at Turin on 27 December 1951 by Cardinal Maurilio Fassati, Archbishop of Turin.

BISHOP OF DIBRUGARH

As Bishop of Dibrugarh, he was able to bring many persons, communities and tribes into the Church. His first priority however was the evangelization of Nagaland and Manipur. He undertook tedious pastoral journeys to Nagaland and Manipur with the permission of the government. In the course of two years alone Bishop Marengo personally visited all the Catholic communities five times. During his visits he picked up several boys and girls and sent them to the various boarding schools in the plains of Assam. He learned Lotha, Tangkhul and other languages of the Naga tribes. In 1953 he crossed the Naga Hills from Kohima mostly on foot and partly in an old military jeep. He compiled prayer books, short catechisms and hymnals for the Tangkhuls and the Lothas. A group of catechists were also trained so that they could go back to Nagaland and Manipur to evangelize and prepare their fellow-brethren for baptism.

The evangelization work in Nagaland was carried amidst stiff opposition and hostility from the American Baptists. Soon with the help of Mr. Mathew, Commissioner of Manipur, Bishop Marengo managed to station as resident priests Frs. Ravalico and Peter Bianchi in Manipur. Until then foreign missionaries were not allowed to reside in Manipur. With the opening of the first missions in Manipur, the evangelization work gathered momentum and within a few years numerous missions were opened there. As Bishop of Dibrugarh Bishop Marengo gave new impetus to the work of evangelization among the Adivasis of Upper Assam. He also visited the Lushais of the present

state of Mizoram. While at Dibrugarh Bishop Marengo often visited the hospital run by the Sisters of Charity (SCCG) and spoke to each of the patients personally. In 1962 the Chinese aggression took place. Bishop Marengo who was at the Second Vatican Council rushed back to India together with Archbishop Ferrando to be with his flock. The aggression affected the speed of the missionary work in Assam and Nagaland-Manipur.

BISHOP OF TEZPUR

In 1964 Bishop Marengo was asked to take up the new diocese of Tezpur. When the Pronuncio Msgr. Knox asked his opinion he tried to say 'no'. As he himself writes: "I confess that it will have cost me much to leave Dibrugarh and the promising missions of Manipur and Nagaland; other than the fact that I did not consider myself as an able administrator to give beginning to a diocese. All the same, if Rome has proposed my name, I could not refuse even if it costs me much". He described his going from Dibrugarh as "sorrowful separation" and "a sacrifice more difficult than the first time when I was made Bishop". Bishop Marengo became the first Bishop of Tezpur in 1964 and started building up the diocese from the scratches. Tezpur had at that time a Catholic population of mere 48,000 spread over 1,30,000 sq. kms.

He soon opened new mission stations, and built schools and churches at many places. In 1967 the Assam Tribune began to publish writings against the foreign missionaries accusing them of destroying the Indian Spirit among the tribals. The Assamese Hindus were unhappy that the tribals were given educational facilities and many of them were becoming Christians. Anonymous letters, false reports and propaganda made the work of the Church more and more difficult. There had been published reports that the Bishop together with the other foreign missionaries would have to leave India.

Thanks to the public opinion created against the government decision in other parts of the country, the Government reconsidered its decision. While the other

missionaries had to leave Assam in two years, Bishop Marengo was merely to be relieved of his post in Tezpur and an Indian appointed in his place. Accordingly in 1969 Bishop Marengo resigned on "health grounds" and Msgr. Joseph Mittathany succeeded him as the Bishop of Tezpur. Bishop Marengo however continued to stay on at Tezpur to help the new Bishop as Procurator of the diocese. He continued to visit the missions, preaching retreats for laity and catechists and occasionally visiting the Mikir and Boro villages.

SHEPHERD OF THE FLOCK IN GARO HILLS

In 1972 Bishop Marengo was asked to take over the leadership of the church in Garo Hills as Apostolic Vicar. He reached Tura on 22 July 1972 by a motor car accompanied by the Archbishop of Shillong-Guwahati and Fr. Bianchi. Years ago he had visited Damra as a brother in practical training and late in 1935 he had made a trip to Tura together with Fr. Scuderi, the provincial. From Mankachar, they had gone by bullock cart travelling all the night to reach Tura in the morning. When Garo Hills was made into a diocese in 1973, Bishop Marengo became its Apostolic administrator. He wrote soon after, "Though I felt an intruder, everybody made me welcome and showed genuine joy that Garo Hills at last had now its bishop". The infant diocese at that time had around 36,000 Catholics spread over six Parishes. There were 14 priests and 26 Sisters. Soon after his arrival he had to meet the problem of the refugees from East Pakistan as a result of the Indo-Pak war. A total of 9 million refugees were there in India at the time.

During the stewardship of Bishop Marengo the diocese grew in all respects. He opened Parishes at Selsella, Tikrikilla, Chokpot, Dadenggiri, Mendal, Williamnagar and Garobadha. Although he was already 66, he soon learned to speak Garo impeccably. He toured the Parishes of the diocese incessantly communicating the message of Christ through talks and also through Bible films. The new Bishop's house was built by him in the year 1975. At his invitation, the MSFS fathers, the Medical Mission Sisters and the Daughters of St. Thomas

began to work in the diocese. Bishop Marengo was also instrumental in starting the training of local boys to the priesthood, St. Paul's catechetical training centre at Tura and the publication of the New Testament in Garo by the Catholic and Protestant Scholars in Garo Hills.

RETIRED BUT ACTIVE

Bishop Marengo retired as Apostolic administrator of Tura in 1979. On his appointment as the first Bishop of Tura, Rt. Rev. George Mamalassery told him that he would accept the appointment only if Bishop Marengo agreed to be by his side. The Bishop willingly agreed to be the Procurator of the diocese as he had already done in Tezpur. Even after his retirement he was active pastorally. From 1979 to 1985 he remained at Mendal calling himself an "assistant parish priest". In 1985 he moved to Dominic Savio Mission, Garobadha. In 1992 he joined the community of Bosco Mount, Rongkhon. Bishop Marengo presided over the Annual Sobhas regularly and administered the Sacrament of Confirmation. In spite of his failing health and age, he did not like missing any of the major functions of the diocese such as opening of Parishes, convents and ordinations. He was regular for Monthly recollections and annual retreats as well.

BISHOP MARENGO'S LAST DAYS

Bishop Marengo's health had been failing towards the end of 1997. A number of times he had to be taken to the hospital. He was admitted in the Holy Cross Hospital on 21 May 1998. His body had become very weak as he was not eating much. Apart from the little tomato soup or ice cream that he liked, he refused to take any other food. His heart too was found to be weak. While in the hospital, he was patient with all the queries of visitors, listening attentively to each one. His holiness, simplicity and affection for the people impressed all. Bishop Marengo was thankful even for the smallest favour he received.

He lamented that others had to suffer inconveniences in looking after him. He was ever jovial, singing and even sharing

jokes. Holy Mass was celebrated every day in his hospital room mostly by Fr. Jose Kulathasseril. The rosary was constantly in his hands and he prayed it often. Time and again he listened to the tapes on the Gospel of Luke. Sr. Rose Kurian and Sonen Basumatary took turns to look after him day and night. The doctors, sisters and other personnel of the Holy Cross Hospital, Tura gave him the best of their attention. Bros. Eligius, Sylvester, the fathers from Bosco Mount and fathers and sisters from the various communities of Tura visited him often.

The bishop's condition deteriorated in the beginning of July. He had also an attack of Malaria in the hospital. By now the news of his illness reached all over North East India. Archbishop Mittathany, Archbishop Menamparampil, Bishop Joseph Aind and the Vicar Generals of Tezpur and Shillong came over to Tura to visit him. The sacrament of the anointing of the sick was administered to him by Fr. Busolin. All of a sudden, the bishop's condition began to improve. He showed some desire to take some food. He also liked to drink a lot of water. He was the old self again, joking and making fun with the visitors. However this improvement was short-lived. Once again his condition deteriorated. He began to feel severe pain on the joints of the body and in the lower abdomen. In the fourth week of July, a few bed sores began to appear at the back. Even in severe pain Msgr. Marengo showed great patience and endurance.

Fr. Andrew Marak, the Vicar General, administered once again the sacrament of the Anointing of the sick. 30th July was a day of Bandh called by the GSU. Hence no priest could offer Holy Mass in his room. Enema had to be given to the Bishop that day as he was feeling severe discomfort in the stomach. Around 1 in the afternoon, the condition of the bishop became very serious. The doctors of the Holy Cross and the Sisters rushed to his bedside. The fathers of St. Peter's Seminary, Bishop's House and Bosco Mount were informed. Unfortunately Bishop Mamalassery was away in Guwahati. Till the last moment Bishop Marengo was fully conscious and

repeated the words "Jesus", "Mary". The good Lord called unto Himself His "good and faithful servant" at 2 p.m.

ADIEU TO BISHOP MARENGO

At the news of his death many priests, religious and laity braved bandh to rush to the Holy Cross hospital. Rev. Fr. Andrew R. Marak, the Vicar General presided over a concelebrated Holy Mass at the hospital before the body of the Bishop was taken to Bosco Mount. Holy mass was celebrated on the same day at Bosco Mount too. The Bishop's body was placed in the chapel and the Staff and students of Bosco Mount spent the night in prayer. On the following day the body was taken to the Bishop's House for a short prayer service and then laid in state at the Sacred Heart Church, Tura. Hundreds of faithful paid their loving respects to the Bishop here. They kept vigil in prayer.

On August 1, the mortal remains of Mons. Marengo was brought to the Cathedral in procession. The funeral was attended by eight bishops of North East India, more than 200 priests, hundreds of religious and around 5000 people. Provincials of many religious congregations too were present. Bishop George Mamalassery who presided over the funeral Mass described Bishop Marengo as a man of God, an apostle of Christ and one totally dedicated to the mission of the Church. Fr. Dominic Jala, Salesian Provincial of Guwahati, speaking at the funeral mass said, "In Bishop Marengo's death we have lost a leader and a friend. His death marks the end of an important foundational period of the church and the Salesian congregation in North East India".

Archbishop Joseph Mittathany of Imphal called Bishop Marengo a holy man, a zealous missionary and a great pastor. Rev. Gilbert Marak, representing the Baptist Church, lauded the ecumenical spirit of Bishop Marengo. Others who spoke on the occasion were Archbishop Tarcisius Resto, Fr. Arthur K. Marak, Sr. Elizabeth Pakumala, Fr. Sebastian Powath, and Mr. John D. Shira on behalf of the laity. Fr. John Matthew sdb said the words of final farewell on behalf of the Bosco Mount

community. Speaker after speaker described Bishop Marengo as one who had run his race and kept the faith. The final commendation was presided over by Archbishop Joseph Mittathany, president of the Regional Bishops' Conference. The mortal remains of the Bishop was then laid to rest in the prepared grave in the Cathedral of Tura.

An year has passed since Bishop Marengo left us for his eternal reward. With his death the Church in North East India has lost a valiant missionary and a holy pastor. No other missionary in North East has done as much as Bishop Marengo. His contributions can not be confined to one place alone. He trekked the length and breadth of the entire region. Almost all the tribes of the North East benefited from his missionary zeal. Bishop Marengo was a man of prayer. He prayed often on his knees. Meeting him was like meeting a truly holy man.

Bishop Marengo was deeply humble. Taking up the yoke of episcopacy, resignations on 'health grounds', underplaying his abilities and attributing his success to the hard-work of others etc. speak volumes for his humility. He was so compassionate to the poor and needy that he kept nothing for himself. He was generous with his funds and shared even his own clothes and food with others. Bishop Marengo had a good word to say about all. He found only positive qualities in people. Even amidst numerous mistakes he would find a good quality in a person to defend and encourage him.

Although Bishop Marengo is no more amidst us, he lives in our hearts and in the works that he has left behind. He will certainly continue to inspire all who knew him with his life and example. He will be a model for the generations to come. Bishop Marengo intercedes from heaven for his beloved mission and people of North East India. May he rest in peace!

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