



OBITUARY LETTER
Fr. Umberto Marocchino, SDB

3 Feb. 1909
Turin, Italy

18 Oct. 1991
Manila, Philippines

October 17, 1992

Dear Confreres,

It has been a year since **Fr. Umberto Marocchino** passed away. When his sickness made a turn for the worst, there was a constant flow of confreres who visited him in his room to spend their time, to pray and to accompany him on his last journey. And yet, ironically enough when the time came, that was approximately at noon, he was alone. The confreres were all taking their lunch, while the nurse who was taking care of him was out to get a quick bite.

Born on February 3, 1909 in Turin, Italy, **Fr. Umberto Marocchino** came in contact with the Salesians as a student at the **College of St. Philip Neri** from 1921 to 1923. In 1924 he left his native country and started his novitiate in Shillong, Assam (India) under the late **Monsignor Stephen Ferrando** as Novice Master. The following year on Christmas Day he made his first profession. It was also there that he made his philosophical and theological studies at **Our Lady's House**. He was ordained deacon at **Bandelshrine** (Bengal) on January 29, 1933. Three months later on April 29, he was ordained priest by **Mons. Perier, SJ**, Archbishop of Calcutta, in Shillong.

He started his missionary work as a priest in Krishnagar Diocese, Bengal until 1938. During the outbreak of World War II, he was taken prisoner and sent to the concentration camp in Dehra Doon, India until 1943. From 1946 to 1949 he worked at Saharanpur, in Agra Diocese in Tezpur and Golaghat, Assam as missionary and touring chaplain for Tea Gardens. Exhausted by the work in the missions, he returned to Italy in 1949 for a much needed rest. In 1950 he returned to India to stay at the Bishop's House in Shillong. There, he acted as assistant parish priest for Hindi and Bengali-speaking Catholics.

On Christmas of 1952 far away in the hill country of **Kohima**, **Fr. Marocchino** celebrated Mass alone on **Tsutuonoma Khel**. He was new in that village, sent there upon the request of **Msgr. Stephen Ferrando**, Bishop of **Shillong** to replace the first resident priest in **Nagaland**, **Fr. Emmanuel Bars** as chaplain to a group of Spanish sisters (known as the **Missionary Sisters of Christ Jesus**) working at the **Naga Hospital**. That meant learning a new language, and adapting to the culture and customs of the hill tribes of **Nagaland**.

Nagaland used to conjure images of diseases, inaccessible hills, and spear wielding naked men whose main religion was animism. Those north-eastern hills in India and the tribal people who lived there have undergone significant social, economic, religious and political changes since. But in those pioneering days **Fr. Dominic Curto** described it as a place where a missionary could "only have Christ as his consolation." **Fr. Marocchino** accepted the challenge. And on his first lonely Christmas there he together with his friends raised a **Christmas Star** atop a bamboo pole in the heart of that village. "Symbolic as it was, that star has given birth to thousands of other Christmas stars which now fill **Kohima** sky every Christmas."

Undaunted by the hard work ahead, he stayed on and made **Kohima** his home and the **Angami** his people. Due to a peculiar rule that did not allow more than one mission to operate in the Naga hills, he was not allowed any pastoral work other than the care of the medical sisters. However, his dedication and his simple ways were eloquent enough to attract many people who came to him for instruction to the Catholic faith. The small band of believers who attended Sunday services at the hospital chapel met opposition and threats especially from the **Angami Baptists** but the faith grew and took roots. His first year in that village was blessed with the first baptism in **Kohima**

on December 14, 1952. **John Keviprale**, was the first Angami member of the Catholic Church in Kohima.

The following year, the sisters were asked by government authorities to stop their services in the Hospital. He was allowed to remain, however, since by that time there was already a strong community growing in the town. He vacated his quarters in the hospital and took abode in a shed at the war cemetery. His friends took turns giving him shelter until he managed to build a small hut in a corner of the village. Later, Naga secessionists raided and burnt it. **Fr. Marocchino** escaped unscathed, as he was at that time in **Imphal**, a neighboring village. He returned to see his home and all his possession gone, including his precious notes on the Angami language. But he refused to give up. His zeal brought him beyond Kohima into Dimapur, Phesama, Kehruma, Khonoma, Nerhema, Merema, Poilwa and Medziphema. He also visited Zunheboto in the heart of the Sema area and taught the people there about the Catholic faith.

In October 5, 1957 he had the joy of having his small chapel consecrated by the **Bishop of Dibrugarh** who was given a special permission to visit Kohima for this occasion. There, the bishop received 16 converts and gave confirmation over a hundred men, women and children.

A true son of **Don Bosco**, he showed true love for young people. He gave shelter to boys, taught them English and prepared them for the "matric" exams in the Kohima Government High School. Many of them have gone ahead in life and now occupy responsible positions in society. On his own he started **Don Bosco Elementary School** temporarily located at the veterinary compound where he used to reside. And together with his friend **Samuel Melzhur** he established the **Kohima English School**.

To supplement his missionary work, he published several books in the Naga language. In 1954 he printed an elementary catechism, **U Kevi Cha** which went through a second edition in 1956. In 1958 he published **U Kelakeliu** (Bible History) and a small illustrated **Life of Christ** in 1959. In the same year he brought out **Catholic Kristanko Kedipuo Peleya** (What do Catholics believe?) In 1961, he helped published **Keche Mu Tsaliida**, a prayer and hymn book compiled by his friend, Philip Suosahie.

After 12 years of hard and dedicated service, the first Catholic missionary for the Angami left Kohima due to further restrictions from the government. He left this parish in October 1963, but not before he had established almost single-handedly a vibrant Catholic community that **Dominic Mezhuvilie**, one of the early converts, would describe as a church "with quality."

From there, he was sent to **Golaghat** and **Damra (Garo Hills)** until he was expelled from India by order from the Home Minister of Delhi in 1969.

In 1970 after a year of rest in Italy, he found himself in the Philippines. He was assigned down south in **Cebu**, then **Don Bosco Center of Studies, Parañaque**, and **Don Bosco Mandaluyong** and made himself available as confessor to countless Salesians and boys. It was in **Mandaluyong** that he stayed for more than 10 years. In 1984 he chose to work as confessor in the then newly built **Mary Help of Christians House of Spirituality** in **Batulao, Batangas**, a hilly mountain resort that resembles very much the Kohima he loved. In his last days there, he would dream endlessly of his friends and work in Nagaland. **Bro. Lorenzo Nardin** who tirelessly looked after him recalled that many times "he would talk of his converts as if they were just around," and the strong afternoon breeze would made him relive the almost countless train rides he took in **India**. One time during one of my daily visits to him he told me he appre-

ciated my coming but "he had to go and visit a village where he was needed". He confided several times that his memories of his beloved mission land was like "a movie that went on and on in his mind".

Fr. Marocchino loved his Angami people very much. When he left them that October 1963, a part of him died. This tremendous love somehow had prevented him from adapting himself to the Philippines. When we realize this, we can understand why he somehow isolated himself and lived mostly alone. From this perspective we can understand the enigma and pathos of a man who loved and worked in a land so far away from ours.

As we celebrate the first death anniversary of this great missionary who founded the Church of Nagaland, let us learn from his zeal and dedicated service to the Church and to the people he loved with intensity and passion. May he also continue to inspire in all of us, especially in our young confreres, the missionary zeal he so much exemplified in his life time.

In Jesus and Mary,

FR. RENATO M. MOLINA, SDB



From left to right: Fr. Marrochino, Bro. Nardin, Fr. Schwarz, Fr. Cogliandro, Fr. Cris Magbhang and Bro. Camino