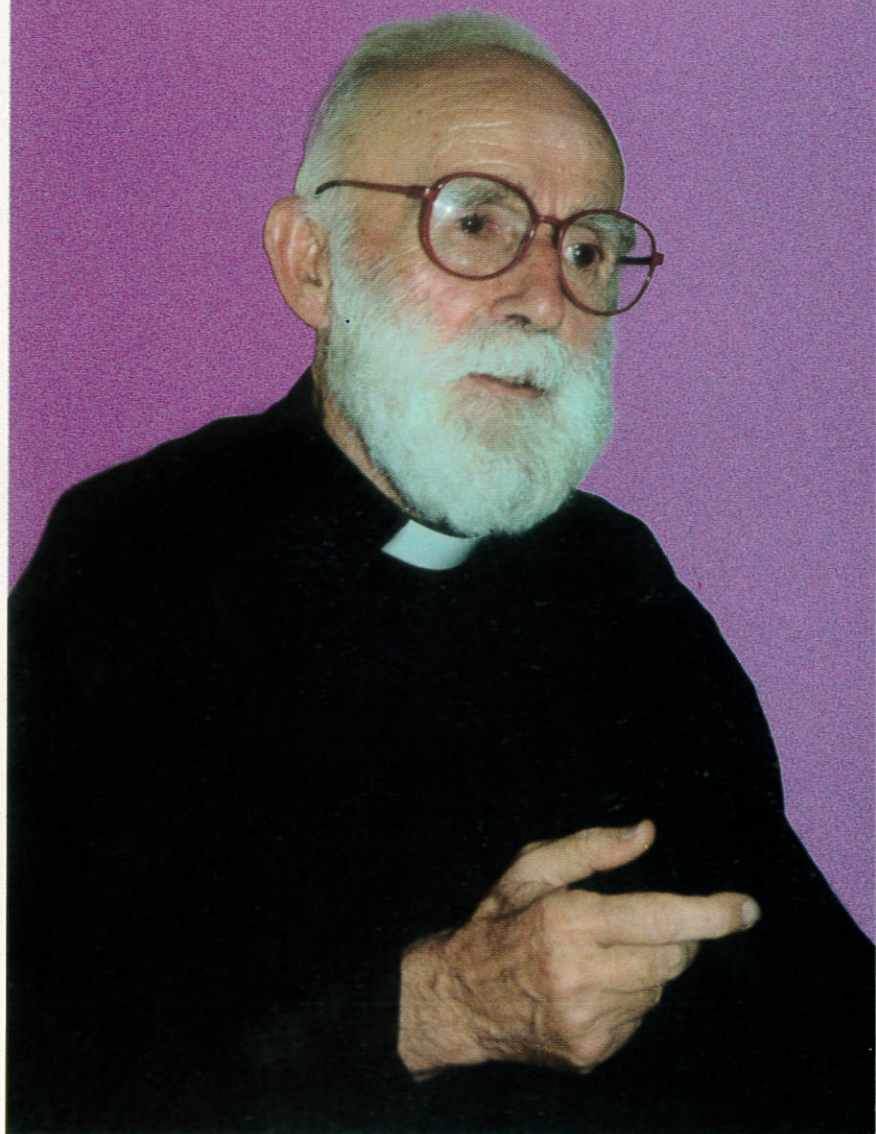
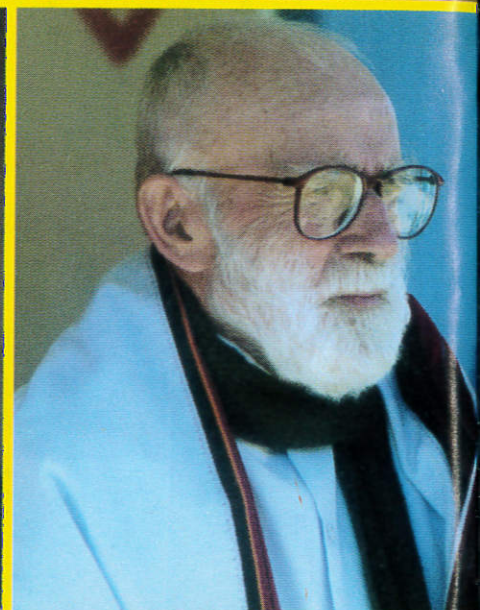
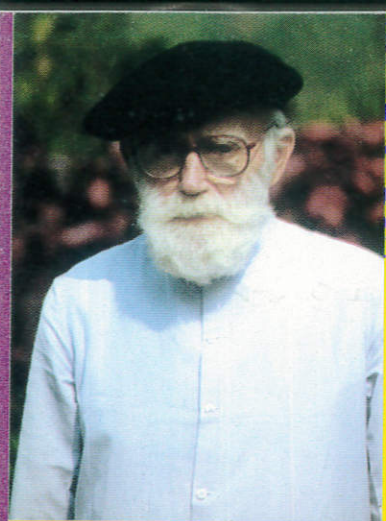


Rev. Fr. Paul Bernik SDB

(1917 - 2000)

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Rev. Fr. Paul Bernik SDB

(1917-2000)

“He who knows how to suffer will enjoy much peace. Such a one is a conqueror of himself and lord of the world, a friend of Christ, and an heir of heaven”, so says the mystic writer Thomas a Kempis of *The Imitation of Christ* fame. Today these words can be rightly applied to Rev. Fr. Paul Bernik, who suffered not only from the time illness confined him to his bed but throughout his life he carried his daily crosses patiently. He hid all his pains behind a gentle humour that was so characteristic of him. He thus endeared himself to everyone that came across his life, small or great, particularly to the Lord whom he endeavoured to imitate till his last breath.

“Death for the Salesian is made bright by the hope of entering into the joy of his Lord, and when it happens that a Salesian

dies working for souls, the Congregation has won a great triumph...” (Art. 54 of the Salesian Constitutions).

Early Life in Yugoslavia:

Paul Bernik was born on 11 January 1917 at Pustal in the diocese of Ljubljana in Yugoslavia. He grew up in the village atmosphere of Pustal with the 350 inhabitants belonging to 60 households. He was the fourth child of Mr. Francis Bernik and Mrs. Lucia Hafner. His eldest brother Florian died of diphtheria at the age of six. His second brother John died after the birth of his second child. Paul's third brother Francis was killed by the Communists during World War II. Gasper, the boy following Paul, too was assassinated by the Communists. People raised a monument in honour of Gasper.

The Communists tortured the sixth boy of the family, Valentine, by removing his skin before killing him. The seventh brother, Joseph, was married in Austria and died a natural death. Paul's eighth brother, Peter, was married and died of cancer. The two sisters of Paul, Teresa and Matilde, died as infants. Paul's father, Mr. Francis, supported the family by working in the cottage industry where he made combs out of animal horns. He also worked in his farm as a farmer. In fact, he was one of the few at Pustal who owned an electric motor. His mother Lucia did household jobs.

Young Paul did five years of elementary school at the Bischoflack (Bishop's House) in the small town of Burgstahl. In 1928 he went to the boarding school at Ljubljana belonging to the Salesian Province of Skofjaloka (Slovenija), invited there by the Salesian Co-operators. There he studied in a public school upto standard five (Gymnasium).

Salesian Formation:

In August 1933 Paul entered the Salesian Novitiate at Radna,

Yugoslavia, straight from the boarding without going through an aspirantate. He made his first religious profession on 11 August, 1934.

At the end of 1934, Bernick was chosen to be missionary in India. On 7 January 1935 he reached Bombay together with five other Salesians after a 10-day voyage by ship from Genova. It was only after 21 years that he went back to his homeland for the first time to visit his near and dear ones.

From 1935 to 1936 he studied Philosophy in the Salesian House at Tirupattur. In the same institute he did his practical training from 1936 to 38. From 1938 to 1940 he continued his practical training at the Salesian House of Poonamallee. In July 1940 he made his final profession. Then he went back to Tirupattur to pursue study of Theology till 1944. It was there that he was ordained priest on 30 January 1944.

Priestly Ministry:

Fr. Paul Bernick's first appointment was at Salesian Col-

lege, Sonada, where he served as Catechist from 1944 till 46. From 1946 to 1948 he worked as prefect of studies at the Salesian House of Poonamallee. From 1948 to 1951 Fr. Bernik lovingly carried out the task of Confessor in the same institute. Next he was appointed Catechist of the Salesian Theologate in the hill station of Yercaud till 1952. In 1952 Fr. Bernik returned to the plains and served as Rector of St. Dominic Savio House at Tirupattur till 1953. In the same capacity Fr. Bernik worked at the Salesian House on the beautiful hill station of Kotagiri from 1953 through 1955. From 1955 to 1959 he served as Catechist at the Sacred Heart Theological College, Mawlai-Shillong. In the latter part of 1959 Fr. Bernik returned to the hill station of Yercaud where he did the administrator's job till 1960 and was Confessor till 1963.

From 1963, Fr. Bernik's apostolate shifted to the distant North-East India which became his field of work till the end of his life. From 1963 to 1964 Fr. Bernik was stationed at Kohima as in

charge of the Catholic Mission and from 1964 to 1969 as its Rector and Parish Priest. The years 1970-1974 found Fr. Bernik in another North-Eastern state: Manipur, the land of jewels. There he served as Confessor and Assistant Parish Priest helping Fr. Sebastian Manianchira sdb in the Immaculate Parish of Imphal which then included a much wider territory than what it is today and offered greater challenges to the missionaries. He toured villages as far-flung as Tamenglong and Khoupum, sometimes accompanied by late Fr. C. A. George sdb and their faithful companion, Mr. Jatra the driver. In 1974-1975 Fr. Bernik was back in the Christ King Parish, Kohima in Nagaland.

In 1975, after a short visit to his native land, Slovenia, Fr. Bernik was shifted to Meghalaya, where he worked as confessor at Don Bosco School, Shillong, at the same time helping the Salesian Aspirantate at Mawlai (Savio Juniorate) and Salesian Novitiate (Sunnyside) at Upper Shillong with confessions. In 1979 he went to Sacred Heart Theological College, Mawlai, where he stayed till

1985 as teacher, liturgical animator and confessor.

Fr. Mathew Pulingathil sdb, who came into close contact with Fr. Bernik from 1985, describes Fr. Bernik's apostolate in Shillong thus, "In Shillong, his ministry of preaching Recollections, Retreats and hearing confessions at all Retreats and Recollections extended to all the communities. He was always ready and willing to go anywhere he could do some ministry." For instance, every First Friday Fr. Bernik would walk to Mawpath to hear confession of the villagers and return to the College, sweating, but in time for classes. He was very conscientious of his duties.

He was at times requested even to substitute recollection and retreat preachers. Fr. Pulingathil recalls an instance in this regard. The preacher of the retreat which was to begin on 15 July 1979 at the Mawlai Theologate did not turn up. The one-day old Rector, Fr. Pulingathil, sent the then liturgical animator to Sunnyside to see if Fr. Bernik could save the situation. At that moment Fr. Bernik was with children in an oratory. On

hearing of the request Fr. Bernik rushed to Mawlai and preached the retreat as if he had been requested for it months in advance!

Last Transfer:

In 1985 Fr. Bernik got his last transfer, to Salesian College in Dimapur, where he spent the longest part of his priestly and Salesian ministry. Here he taught Liturgy, Salesiana and Sacred Scripture. He sat long hours in the confessional every morning and evening. Though advanced in years he never thought of taking rest. He was always busy doing something: plumbing, inspecting the various parts of the house and the compound, playing Bocce or watching the Brothers at play. Every moment of his life was usefully utilized.

His Illness and Death

Fr. Paul Bernik always had a fragile health. But his health started worsening from 1998. He was taken by Fr. Provincial for his first medical check-up on 15 Jan. 1998 at the Mercy Home,

Dibrugarh. On 2 March he was taken to the Holy Redeemer Hospital at Chumukedima-Dimapur. Since then till his death, it had been a long history of ups and downs in his health conditions and visits to these two health centres. His visit to Dibrugarh on 17 May 1998 kept him there, contrary to his wishes, for 13 days.

On 4 October Fr. Bernik complained of severe pain on his leg. On the following day he was taken to Mercy Home, Dibrugarh, where he had to stay nearly two months, till 29 November 1998.

On 2 March 1999 Fr. Bernik complained of stomach ailment. In the Holy Redeemer Health Centre Dr. (Sr) Flora diagnosed gastric problem and after medication sent him back home. But he was re-hospitalised at Chumukedima on 8 March, with a Brother to look after him. On 10 March Fr. John Med annointed him in the presence of the Rector of Salesian College, Fr. James Poonthuruthil.

Fr. Bernik grew weaker day by day and was in need of constant assistance. From 22 March 1999

a girl, Miss Alice, was employed to look after him 24 hours. On 11 May Fr. Bernik was so weak that he had to be rushed to the Holy Redeemer for drips.

Gradually Fr. Bernik's eating habits began to be affected. On 26 May he could not take his breakfast and was disturbed. Fr. Provincial visited him in the morning and accompanied him to the hospital at Chumukedima.

Alice herself got sick and had to leave in the first week of July. From 10 July onwards, Miss Pauline, an Angami girl from Kohima, replaced Alice who had looked after Fr. Bernik till he breathed his last.

On 21 July, 1999 Fr. Bernik was again rushed to Holy Redeemer. After infusion of Saline drips he was brought back to Salesian College. On 3 August he developed bed-sores and sleeping became a problem. He was taken to the doctor in Holy Redeemer. After dressing up he returned to the College. Some adjustment was made on his bed too.

The dawn of the third

nium found Fr. Bernik's health deteriorating rapidly. His movements became minimal. He had to be helped for every little movement. On 10 March 2000 the Bishops of North-East India, many of whom had been his pupils, visited him in his sick room in the College.

His pain on the leg, especially on his right toe became acute. Dr. Flora visited him in the College on 16 March and removed the nail which was growing on his right toe. This brought him some relief.

On 26 March in the presence of many Confreres of the College Fr. John Med annointed Fr. Bernik for the second time. But gradually he became weaker and even little things began irritating him at times. When Dr. Flora visited him on 31 March she found him quite agitated.

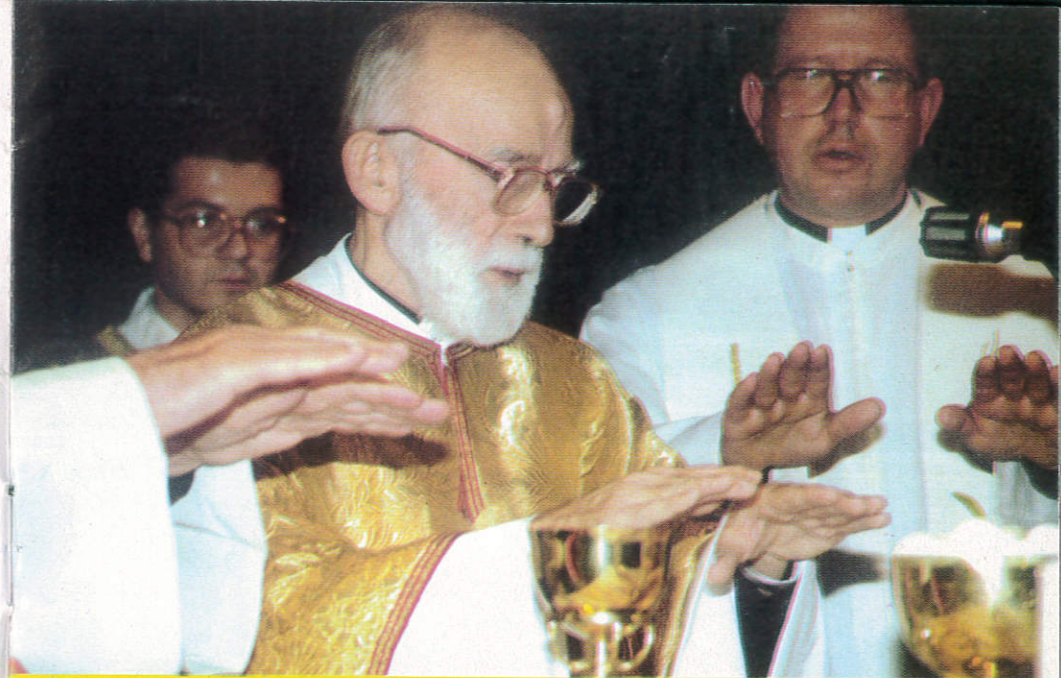
From 6 April Fr. Bernik was growing very weak. He did not recognize people easily. He found it difficult to sit or to talk. When Fr. Provincial visited him on 9 April he found him in a serious condition. From April, Holy Com-

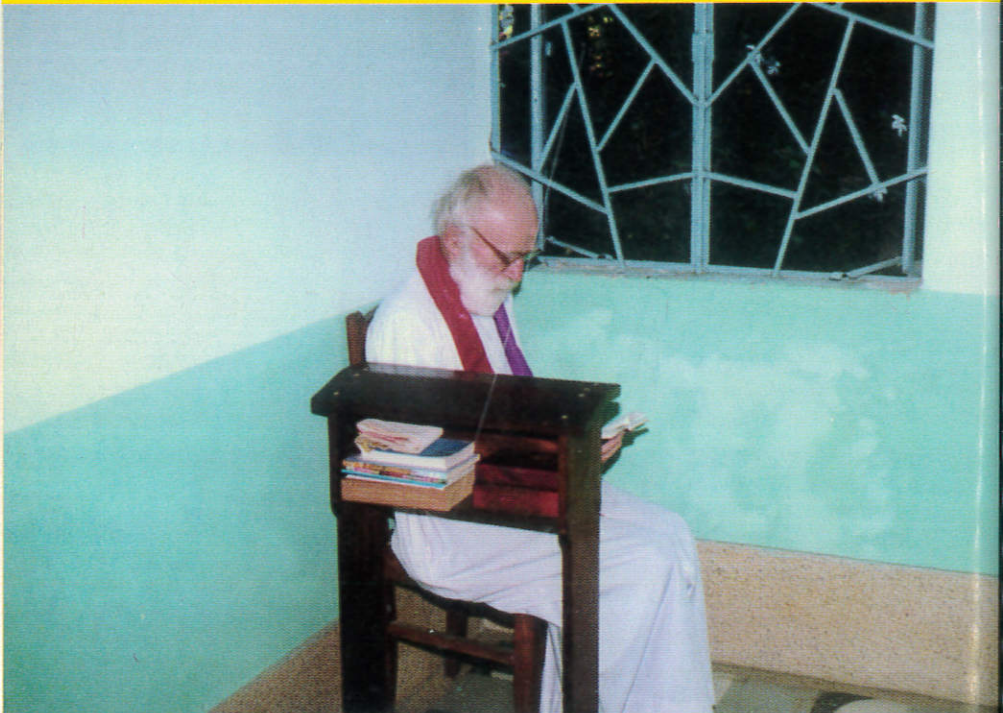
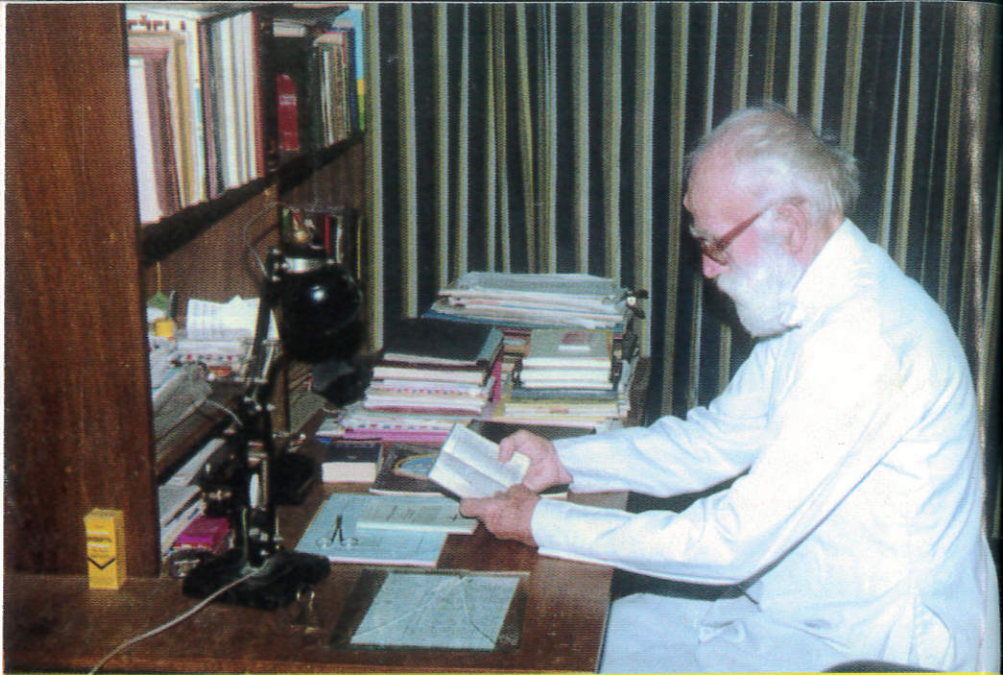
munion was served to him in the form of consecrated wine as he was not able to swallow the Host even with water. From 10th April onwards Miss Martha Mao, a trained nurse, joined Miss Pauline to look after Fr. Bernik who now needed closer attention and greater help.

On 9 May his condition deteriorated further. He became restless, was finding difficult to breath and was sweating all over. Dr. Flora visited him in the afternoon and found his pulse very low. His heart had become very weak. In the evening Fr. Paulinus Chempalayil anointed him (for the third time). Some confreres kept vigil the whole night. On 10 May Dr. Flora visited him again. His condition had improved though he still experienced much pain.

On 14 July Miss Maria and Miss Jana, two girls from the native place of Fr. Bernik came to visit him. Their visit cheered him up a lot.

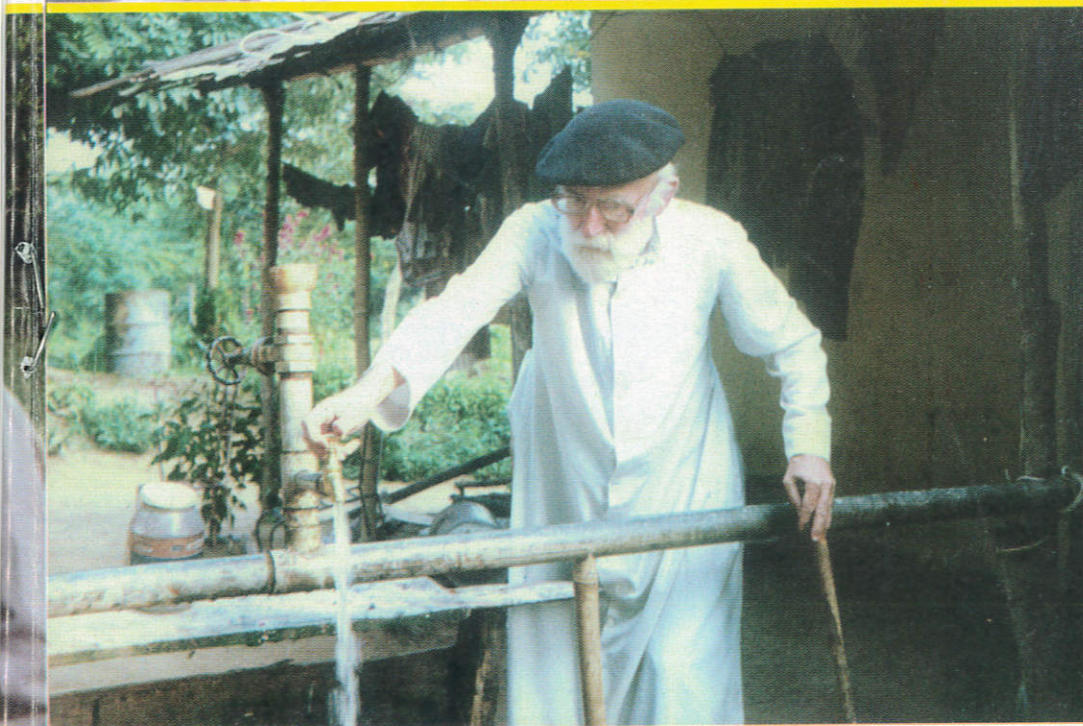
On 17th July the condition of Fr. Bernick suddenly deteriorated. In the afternoon, he complained

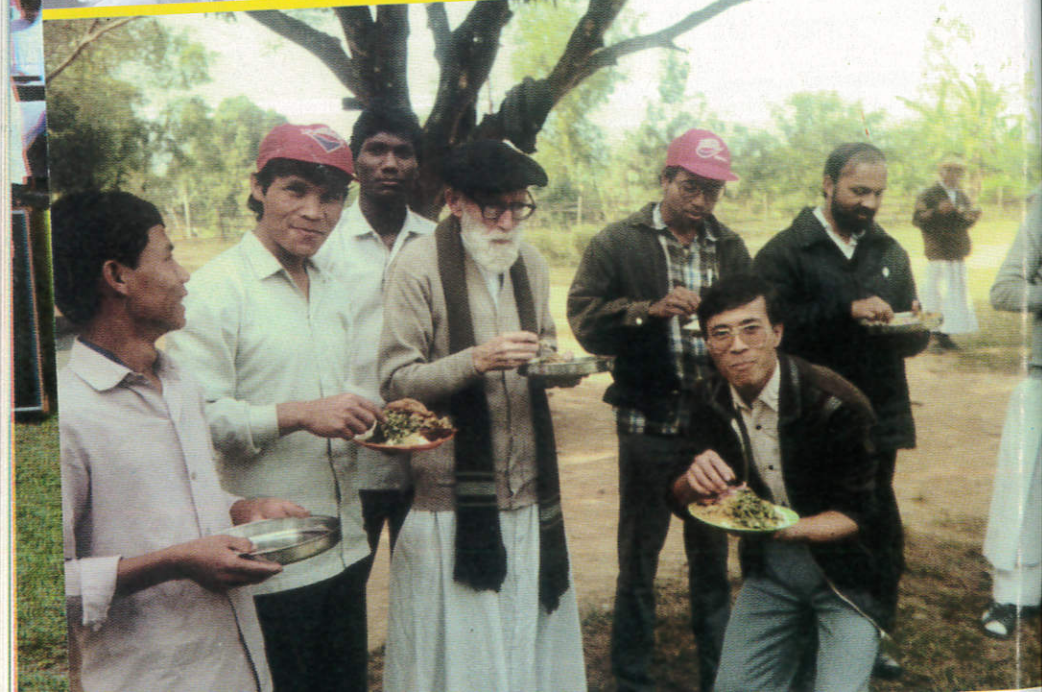


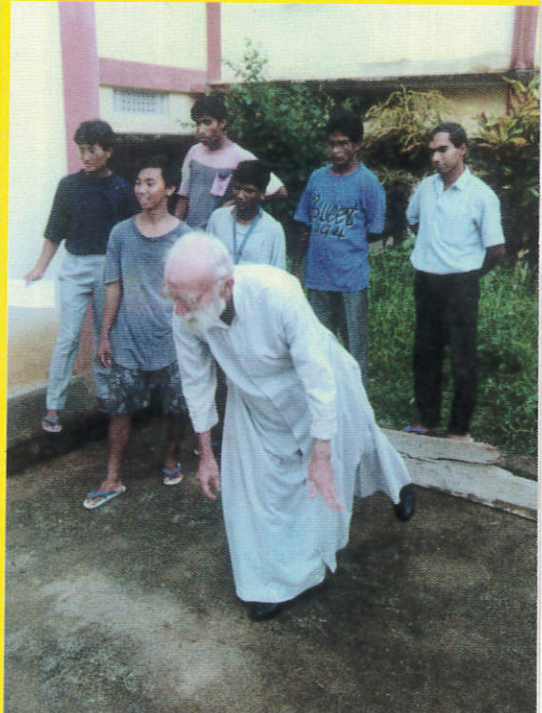


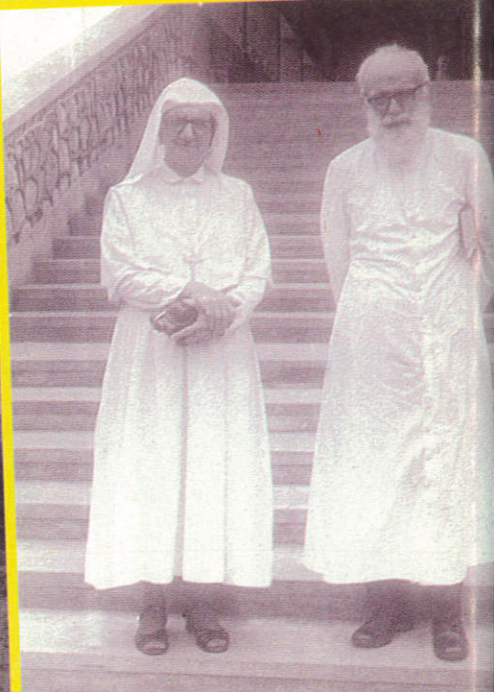












of difficulty in breathing. Arrangements were immediately to take him to the Holy Redeemer Hospital, Chumukedima. The doctor attended on him immediately. But there was no improvement. Fr. Alex Pulimoottil, the Vice Provincial anointed him in the presence of many confreres and sisters. At 8.20 p.m. Fr. Bernik passed away surrounded by confreres and sisters. When he died Fr. Bernik was 84 years old and had worked in India for 64 years and had acquired Indian Citizenship. After the death, the mortal remains of Fr. Bernik was brought to Salesian College, Dimapur.

On 18 July, Archbishop Joseph Mittathany of Imphal came to pay respects to his teacher. The funeral took place on 19 July, in the Salesian Cemetery at Salesian College, Dimapur. A large crowd of Priests, Sisters and lay people took part in the funeral service. The Funeral Mass was presided over by Rt. Rev. Jose Mukala, the Bishop of Nagaland. He was assisted by Rt. Rev. Joseph Aind, the bishop of Dibrugarh. There were nearly 150 priests concelebrating. Rev. Fr. Thomas Mulayinkal, the

newly appointed Provincial, gave the funeral oration and conducted the service at the tomb.

Fr. Bernik as a Person:

Fr. Bernik was richly blessed with many sterling qualities. They need not be called 'talents' which make one shine out with spectacular achievements. Fr. Bernik possessed richer gifts than these. He was richly endowed with a rare combination of the gifts of the head and heart. We mention just a few of these characteristics that endeared Fr. Bernik to whomever he met in his life.

1. A Gentleman:

Fr. Bernik has been considered a gentleman by all who knew him. In his dealings with others he was very gentle. Mr. Lucas Meyase who met Fr. Bernik first in 1965 as a student at Kohima, has only words of praise for Fr. Bernik. He describes Fr. Bernik as one who "could not get angry with people". "Whenever he was upset his face would become red and then he would go to his room to

millenspend few minutes alone to be back as cheerful as before”, Mr. Meyase recalls. This characteristic of Fr. Bernik lasted all his life. Even when prolonged suffering of illness and old age made him at times irritable he would immediately add: “Oh, but I am sorry.”

2. A lovable person:

Fr. Paul Bernik was one who had nothing to dole out to others by way of material succor. But he had endeared himself to all who came across his life. This was because he had made a gift of himself to others. He always thought of others. Even on his sick bed, when he had hardly the strength to speak, he would gaze around and say: “Oh, I hope you have some chairs to sit down.” And people loved him in return. Some years back as Fr. Bernik was walking through the streets of Kohima, a barber left his saloon, greeted him and told him that he had cut his hair 20 years earlier. The constant flow of people from all walks of life who came to visit him is another proof of their love for him.

Once giving a good night talk

on the death anniversary of Fr. Valloggia, his companion and friend, he said: I tried my best to find a fault in him, but could not”. Only a good man can find goodness in others.

3. A Busybee:

For Fr. Bernik idleness was something unthinkable. Apart from his teaching and hours spent in the confessional, he kept himself busy with all sorts of manual work. As late as 1997 he was seen busy inspecting every nook and corner of Salesian College and its vast compound, looking for anything that needed to be repaired or replaced. He could put his hand to anything. But the job in which he excelled was plumbing. To a query about his skills in plumbing he once said, “my father was a jack of all trades. Many people from the neighbourhood came to him for various help. I acquired the practical sense of the trade from him”.

4. A Humourist:

Fr. Bernik possessed a deep sense of humour. No matter what

the subject one introduced, Fr. Bernik would easily find a witty incident to connect with. He would always commence his narration with the words, "I remember..." Even on his bed of pain he would often resort to cracking jokes. Fr. P. X. Francis once asked Fr. Paul Bernik if he could just call him 'Paul'. Fr. Bernik immediately replied, "Well, I suppose you can't call me Peter"! When Fr. M.K. Joseph died at an early age, Fr. Bernik remarked: "Death does not practise good manners; he lets the younger ones to go ahead and make the older ones to wait"!

15. An Obedient Salesian:

Fr. Manianchira Sebastian had the privilege of having Fr. Bernik as his Assistant Parish Priest at Imphal. He testifies that in spite of his seniority Fr. Bernik always showed great respect towards his Superiors and their wish was a command for him. But Fr. Bernik did not confine his deference only to his superiors but exhibited great respect to everyone, Confreres, lay people and even children.

In fact, Fr. Bernik excelled in

the practice of all the vows he had made as a young Salesian. Someone described him as "a Salesian to the core." A parsimony of words, yes. But they speak volumes in praise of Fr. Bernik.

6. A Zealous Missionary

Fr. Bernik's missionary zeal was particularly evident during his stay at Kohima as in-charge of the Catholic Mission there from 1963 to 1964 and as Parish Priest of Christ King Parish, Kohima, from 1964 to 1969. He was not an arm-chair missionary, but toured the villages extensively spending much of his time administering sacraments and patiently listening to all who came to him. From 1970 to 1974 he served as Asst. Parish priest at the Immaculate Mary's Parish in Imphal. He toured the villages extensively as far as Khoupum and Tamenglong in spite of bad roads and the inclemency of the weather.

7. A Patient Sufferer:

Fr. Bernik was known to be a silent sufferer. Whatever his

sufferings he would never complain to anyone. "Suffering is an act of surrender" is how Fr. Paul Bernik liked to remind others and himself about his life on his bed of suffering. "I accept it (suffering). It is God's plan for me", he continues. Moreover, he was quick to add, "suffering becomes God's plan for us only if we accept it happily."

8. A great devotee of Mary, the Mother of God.

From his childhood days Fr. Bernik was devoted to Mary as was taught to him by the example of his aunt. In February 1999 he was about to be run over by a chariot. When he was knocked down to the ground the eight horse-hoofs and four wheels of the chariot missed him because of the prayer he whispered to Mary. He attributed his Salesian and priestly vocation to the special intervention of Mary Help of Christians in his life. All his life he showed his gratitude to Mary Help of Christians. Even on his sick bed, one could often hear him calling on Mary even calling her 'Mama'. He always asked the visitors to pray for him to the Blessed Virgin.

In Memoriam

Rev. Fr. Paul Bernik was appreciated and loved by all for his simplicity and availability. Wherever he went, he won the hearts of people. Many eminent persons paid rich tributes to the late Rev. Fr. Paul Bernick. They remain as perpetual homage of thanksgiving for the gift God gave us in him.

"Fr. Bernik's saintly life has been an inspiration to me right from the time of my novitiate and first years in religious life, when he was our teacher and Confessor in Yercaud. His piety, his gentleness and availability endeared him to all. From heaven, may he intercede for us all". **Rev. Fr. Joaquim D'Souza, the Regional Councillor, Australasia.**

Speaking of Fr. Bernik, **Rev. Fr. Thomas Panakezham** remarked: "A very humble, unassuming, gentle, hard working and sacrificing Salesian. Never sought for position or rank in society but to help the young and the simple people. When we heard of his death **Fr. Vallicherry Matthew** spontaneously remarked, 'we have now an intercessor in

heaven'. This is indeed true. He was an excellent Salesian full of wit and humour, very sociable and a man of God, the Church and the Congregation”.

Rev. Fr. John Med, the companion and friend of Fr. Bernik has this to say of him: “ All us were united in admiring Fr. Bernik’s goodness, gentleness and piety. For me the name ‘Dominic Savio’ given to him by his companions in the earliest years was well applied. Wherever he went, he gained very good reputation as a fervent Salesian and very active missionary around Kohima and later in the eastern district of Manipur.

“In the death of Rev. Fr. Bernik we have lost, not just a priest and a Salesian, but a hard core missionary, a very shrewd pastor, and ever ready preacher, a friendly and sympathetic confessor and a true friend and companion on whom one could depend at all times. He spent the greater part of the last 40 years and more of his life among the Angami people. He was the shepherd and pastor of the Angami Catholics during the most difficult period of the

growth of the Church in Angami area. Most of us are what we are today, not because of the waters of Baptism he poured on us, but because of the security and spiritual leadership that he provided us. It is through him that we learnt the true meaning of the Catholic Church and of being a Catholic Christian”. **Mr. V. Lucas Meyase** of St. Francis De Sales Parish Church, Kohima. “Rev. Fr. Bernik the pioneer missionary has fully sacrificed himself for the Nagas, particularly for Angamis”. **L. Peter Chasie**, President of Angami Catholic Union, Kohima.

“Fr. Bernik was a very learned, cultured and holy Salesian, teacher, conversationalist and companion”. **Fr. Sebastian Karotemprel SDB**. “Fr. Bernik always impressed me with his simple, holy and exemplary Salesian life. He was always an inspiration to our young salesians. With his joviality and unassuming manners he always made us feel at home”. **Fr. Benjamin Puthota SDB**. “Fr. Bernik was noted for his gentleness and availability and was liked by all. He was a great missionary and a loved pastor. He was a man always available and ready to

stand by you in any situation with his wisdom and wit". **Fr. Michael Mundathanathu (MM) SDB.**

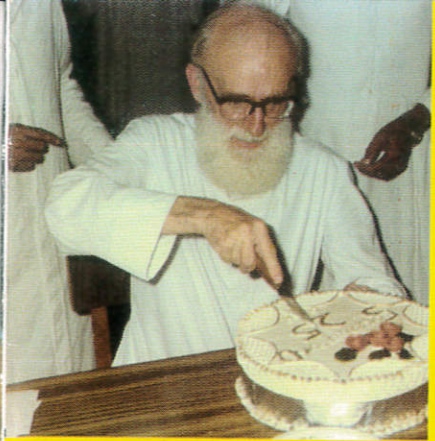
"Fr. Bernik's life was most edifying. Indeed he was the Lamb of God. He did yeoman service in Poonamalle Seminary for 10 years and more". **Bro. Robert Dias SDB.**

Conclusion

The passing away of Rev. Fr. Paul Bernick has left us all in deep sorrow and Salesian College Dimapur where he spent 15 long years feels his absence the most. His many qualities of head and heart, his exceptional apostolic

zeal and his genuine religious spirit will always remain alive in our hearts and minds as a source of inspiration. The pain of separation is tempered by the fact that though we have lost a brother and friend on earth, we have gained a saint and an intercessor in heaven. Art 54 of our Constitutions reinforces this our belief: "The memory of departed confreres unites in a love that will not pass away, those who are still pilgrims with those who are already resting in Christ."

Fr. James Poonthuruthil
SDB
(Rector)
30th June 2001





Necrology

Born	: 11th January, 1917
Professed	: 11 August, 1934
Priestly Ordination	: 30 January, 1944
Died	: 17 July, 2000