



**FR. JOSEPH**  
**SANDANAM, S.D.B.**  
(1900–1987)



## FR. JOSEPH SANDANAM, S.D.B.

(1900 - 1987)

On January 5th 1987 the Salesian Province of Madras mourned the death of a veteran Salesian Fr. Joseph Sandanam. Endowed with extraordinary gifts of heart and mind he lived the Gospel values with great enthusiasm. True to the spirit of Don Bosco he was a messenger of God's love to many poor and abandoned boys. His spirit of joy, optimism and deep faith coloured every day of his life.

### **Brief biographical glimpses**

Joseph Sandanam, son of Chinnapillai and Maria Thangammal, was born in Trichy on 10th May 1900. He was baptized by Fr. Misquita, a Goan, in the Church of Our Lady of Dolours, Trichy. His father passed away while he was hardly two years old. Joseph Sandanam and his brother Mariaselvam, who later became the first Bishop of Vellore, used to walk a mile every day to serve Holy Mass. His Mother, a woman of faith, would pray daily that both of them should become priests. God answered her prayers. His brother Mariaselvam went to the Salesian Institute at Thanjavur and from there he was sent to the Salesian Minor Seminary and went on to become the first Indian Salesian to be raised to episcopal dignity. Joseph Sandanam in turn entered St. Xavier's Orphanage at the age of eleven. He passed the Anglo- Indian High School Examination in St. Bede's and was an assistant to Fr. Tomatis from 1918 to 1920. After his school studies, he returned to Thanjavur and became the right hand of Fr. Mora, who was the administrator of the Salesian Institute there. He used to teach Tamil to Fr. Mora who in turn taught him Latin. Fr. Mora was very fond of him since he found in him a musician, a sportsman and a faithful secretary with many capabilities.



In 1922 he was sent to St. Paul's Seminary, Trichy, where he studied philosophy under the Jesuits, and in 1924 he made his Novitiate in Shillong. His first Religious Profession was on 21st January 1925.

After his practical training in Thanjavur, he was sent to the International Institute of Crocetta, Turin, in 1927. Unfortunately he could not complete his studies there since he had a severe attack of pleurisy, which necessitated his return to India in 1929. After completing his Theology in Shillong, He was ordained priest on 26 April 1931 (at that time the feast day of Bl. John Bosco).

Immediately after his ordination, he was posted as Assistant Parish Priest of St. Mary's Co-Cathedral and Assistant Headmaster of St. Gabriel's High School, which was then situated on Armenian Street. In July 1932 he was transferred to Vellore, where he worked for over 30 years holding several responsible positions. Here he was awarded the "Queen Mary's Silver Medal" by the Governor of Madras, in recognition of the services rendered to the poor.

He was Rector of St. Gabriel's High School, Madras, from 1945 to 1946. From 1946 to 1949 he was the Rector and Manager of St. Joseph's English High School, Trivandrum. During this period he was also the Member of the Government Board of the High School Department, Kerala. After this he served as Parish Priest of Assumption Church, Madras, for six years.

As Rector and Parish Priest of Lourdes Shrine, Perambur, during the years 1955 to 1963, he gave new impetus to Marian Pilgrimage and devotion to Mary under the title "Our Lady Of Lourdes".

He took charge as rector of St. Thomas Minor Seminary, Mylapore in the year 1964. The Seminary experienced a fresh breath of life and enthusiasm under his able guidance.



In 1968, he was given the responsibility of animating the parish of St. Francis Xavier, Broadway, Madras, where he worked till 1973. The parish became a centre for liturgical music in Tamil.

From 1973 to 1976 he was a professor at the Sacred Heart Seminary, Poonamallee, where he taught Sacred Music both in Tamil and in English. It is during this time that the "Souvenir of his Golden Jubilee" - a collection of English songs and Masses - was published. He was also one of the spiritual animators of the seminary.

He spent the next four years at Lourdes Shrine, K. Pudur, Madurai. During this period he was also responsible for the spiritual animation of ten convents of different congregations in Madurai.

Since his health was not at its best, in compliance with the wishes of the superiors, he went to St. Bede's in 1980. Even though he was suffering from a heart ailment, he insisted on being with the community as much as he could. He was a confessor and at the same time contributed towards the maintenance of the orphans with his propaganda.

On the morning of New Year's day 1987 Fr. Joseph Sandanam was rushed to Apollo Hospital, Madras, as his health had deteriorated badly. He passed away on 5 January 1987 at the same hospital.

### **Highlights of his Apostolate**

The Apostolic zeal of Fr. Sandanam was very remarkable. Wherever he worked he has left an indelible imprint of his missionary dynamism and creativity. We shall highlight just a few.

#### **Vellore**

Fr. Sandanam went to Vellore with great zeal and missionary enthusiasm. He set in motion many pioneering enterprises. Don Bosco Industrial School was constructed under his able guidance. It was transferred later to Katpadi as St. Joseph's



Boy's Home. In the face of formidable opposition from all quarters, he started the Don Bosco High School. The first church of Mary Help of Christians in North Arcot was built by him in Kattupadi. Fr. Sandanam also acquired the present Bishop's House with its huge compound and the vast open land from Officer's Main Road to the Parish Priest's House. Another achievement of great social impact was the construction of a two-mile road from Arni to Adakambarai.

### **Trivandrum**

As Rector and Manager of St. Joseph's School, Trivandrum, he worked hard to transfer the management of the school to the Salesians.

He was appointed as Representative of all the Catholic schools of Trivandrum Diocese and also the Director of the Newman Association, i.e. a group of elite Catholics of Trivandrum like Hon. John, who later became Governor of Madras, Justice Joseph Thaliath, Minister Chacko and others. During this period Fr. Sandanam was also in charge of Carmel High School in Nagercoil. Writing to the provincial from St. Bede's on 31 March 1980 he recalls the bitter experience he had in Nagercoil. "I am happy to learn that you were in Nagercoil and beginning once again the work that we were doing some 34 years ago. That was the time when I was the Rector of St. Joseph's High School, Trivandrum, and looked after also the Carmel High School. It was a big job to keep all the roaring lions quiet! Several times I had to go there, meet the staff and set right the difficulties. Many memories—good and bad—cross my mind. But all is past".

### **Perambur**

With the efforts and help of Fr. Seeber, he was able to build the upper church of Lourdes Shrine, while the lower church had already been constructed by Fr. Mariotta. He encouraged lay



leadership by organizing the parochial board and enlivening various activities and movements in the parish.

### **St. Francis Xavier's Church, Broadway**

We shall acquaint ourselves with one of his important achievements at St. Francis Xavier's from the words of Fr. Sandanam himself: "In 1968, I was appointed Parish Priest of St. Francis Xavier's Church Broadway, Madras, where I worked till 1973. Good Fr. Mantovani of happy memory, with a view to beautify the church, removed the binding rods from the vaults of the age-old church. One good day towards noon, there was a loud crash in the church. The ceiling was ripped into two from the very entrance to the sanctuary. It constituted a real danger, and experts pronounced that religious functions could not be held safely in the church. Thereupon, with courage and confidence in Mary Help of Christians. I renovated the church, presbytery and the Sagayamatha Hall". The devotion to Mary Help of Christians was made popular during this time. Devotees from all over Madras flocked to the shrine on 24th of every month to participate in the Marian services.

### **Madurai**

As Assistant Parish Priest of Lourdes Shrine, Madurai, from 1976 to 1980, Fr. Sandanam carried out many responsibilities in the parish as well as in the diocese under the direction of Archbishop Diraviam. But the memory he cherished most was the liberation of 2000 bonded labourers from the Yanamalai Quarry. Fr. Sandanam has handed over to us the reminiscences of this great undertaking in the following statement: In the year 1976, in the name of the Salesians working in Lourdes Shrine, K. Pudur, I liberated through the Collector of Madurai nearly 2000 stone-cutters, who had been under bonded labour for nearly 25 years. In the name of the salesians, I then adopted the Yanamalai Quarry to work for its



social, educational, religious and economic uplift. True to the promise, I undertook several projects. It must be mentioned that "Yanamalai fever" caught not only me but also Fr. Tohill, who in sympathy for the stone-cutters, sent a very substantial sum of money for their welfare".

### **Spiritual Gleanings**

The secret of Fr. Sandanam's apostolic zeal was his spirit aglow with love of God and neighbour. We shall reflect on some of the spiritual insights of this great salesian. It will not be an exaggeration to affirm that his success in life was the fruit of his spirit of prayer. He loved prayer and he prayed much as we can gather from this excerpt from his letter to the provincial from Poonamallee seminary. On 29 April 1974: I take delight in being before the Blessed sacrament. *Esse cum Jesu Dulcis Paradisus*". Elsewhere Fr. Sandanam says "God has always been good to me and with His help and grace I have achieved many things; but all honour and glory are due to Him alone".

He cherished religious values and adhered to his religious commitment. Strengthened by his deep confidence in God he lived the life of obedience joyfully. At the age of 73 when he was asked to take up a new project in Thanjavur, he replied the provincial: "One must sacrifice oneself for the sake of others. Why should I not? I will go and do the holy will of God. If I shall not be able to do much, I may have at least the satisfaction of having done the will of God and sacrificed myself for Him and for the congregation". His deep sense of detachment and poverty are very evident from the words he wrote from Madurai on 25 July 1977: "My heart is completely detached from all affection for money. I don't possess anything. I am only an administrator in the hands of God".

True to the spirit of Don Bosco, Fr. Sandanam was a tireless worker. Old age and sickness did not cripple his courageous



spirit. He writes to the Provincial on 14 August 1984: " I don't complain about my ailments. I will work till I die at work . Kindly pray for me. By the way, I say the Rosary for you daily".

Though Fr. Sandanam has moved to his eternal reward, his spirit lingers in the hearts and minds of thousands of people whom he touched through his priestly and religious ministry. His life of faith, optimism and joy continues to challenge us to greater fidelity to the Lord and his Gospel in the footsteps of Don Bosco.

May his soul rest in peace!

Yours affectionately in Don Bosco,

FR. PAUL KACHAPILLY, SDB

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**NECROLOGY:**

Born at Trichy on 10.05.1900.

Professed on 21.01.1925.

Ordained a Priest on 26.04.1931.

Called to eternal bliss on 05.01.1987.

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