



Fr. John Schilder, S.D.B.

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Salesians of Don Bosco
52A, Radhanath Chowdhury Road
Calcutta 700 015

Dear Confreres,

In the passing away of our dear Fr. John Schilder, the Province lost one of its pioneer missionaries and an inspiration for our missionary enthusiasm. And today at this great loss we respond with the same sentiments of faith and hope of Job: "The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away." May His will be done.

30th July 1983 was the last day of Fr. John Schilder on earth, without anyone having the least suspicion it would be so. At 6.30 am, as usual, Fr. John and Fr. K. J. Dominic reached the altar for the Holy Mass. As though not sure if he had to be the main celebrant, he turned to Fr. Dominic and asked: "Do you want me to start?" He intoned the psalms of the Morning Prayer and was the main celebrant—that was his last Mass.

The rest of the day was spent as usual. That day he was exceptionally happy and jovial. In the morning he received some of his friends and spent time with them. At lunch the whole conversation turned around an invitation that Fr. John had received from the Dutch Consul in Delhi. The Consul was coming to Calcutta soon and he had invited all the Dutch Nationals in Calcutta to a party at Grand Hotel.

That afternoon he rested as usual and came down even early for tea. He remained for about half an hour at table with the rest of the community talking and joking. At around 4.00 pm everyone moved out of the refectory. Fr. John went up to his room accompanied by Br. G. P. Paul. Bro. Paul remained with Fr. John for a few minutes and then moved off to the Library. After about two minutes he heard the sound of someone falling. Bro. Paul rushed to the room of Fr. John and found him on the floor. He shook him and called him by name. There was no answer. He immediately rushed to the office of Fr. Dominic. Soon the confreres of both Provincial House and Don Bosco Tengra were at the side of Fr. John. Fr. A. Colussi anointed Fr. John. All this happened within a few minutes. What followed was an agonizing moment of silence. They just looked at one another speechless. The unthinkable had happened — Fr. John Schilder was gone. He had suffered a cardiac failure.

In the mean time, news spread and Confreres, Sisters and Christians came rushing to be close to Fr. John. His body was laid out in the spacious library of the Provincial House. Fr. Colussi, the Vice-Rector, together

with the confreres offered Holy Mass with a large number of Sisters and faithful participating. Around 7.00 pm his Eminence Cardinal L. T. Picachy came to pay his last respects to Fr. John. Visitors continued to pour in and prayers without stop were offered up, till late at night.

On Sunday, 31st, at 1.00 pm his body was carried from the Provincial House to the Salesian cemetery at Bandel. At 3.15 pm it was laid out in the Shrine of Our Lady. Confreres, Sisters and friends from our various institutions and mission stations joined to pay their last respects to Fr. John at Bandel. Requiem Mass started at 4.00 pm presided over by Fr. Provincial. Bishop Abraham Alangimattathil of Nagaland, Bishop Thomas Menampambil of Dibrugarh and 38 priests concelebrated. In his homily, Fr. Luciano Colussi presented the life and death of Fr. John as the celebration of the Paschal mystery, modelled on the life and death of Christ. Bishop Abraham presided at the funeral rites in the church and Bishop Thomas at the grave. Fr. Provincial wished Fr. John goodbye in the name of the province, the Salesian family and particularly the community of the Provincial House. The funeral service was over at around 5.30 pm.

Fr. John Schilder was born on June 13, 1907 at Volendam, Holland. His parents were John and Johanna Schilder. He was baptized on the day he was born. He would fondly recall his childhood days when he would go out to the sea with his father, fishing. And it was from those waters that Jesus called him. Like the apostles he left his father, the boat and the net and decided to join Jesus and be a fisher of men. So, after elementary studies in his home town, John joined the Salesian Aspirantate at Ivrea, Italy, where he remained from 1926 to 1929.

After donning the clerical habit at Ivrea, John sailed for India, the wonderland of which he had heard so much. He landed at the Gate Way of India, Bombay, on December 23, 1929. After a brief stop there, he proceeded to Shillong where he joined the novitiate.

He made his first profession on January 6, 1931 in Shillong and remained there at "Our Lady's House" to complete his philosophical studies. In 1933, at the completion of his studies in philosophy, he was sent to Don Bosco, Krishnagar, as Assistant and teacher. During his short stay at Krishnagar he mastered the Bengali language and fell in love with the land of Tagore.

In 1935 Fr. John went up to Shillong again for his theological studies and on November 5, 1938 he was ordained priest by Archbishop Perier S.J. of Calcutta. He had dreamt of the vast missions of India—now it had become a reality.

As a young priest Fr. John went back to Don Bosco School, Krishnagar, where he worked as Headmaster of the developing school. In 1941 he was transferred to Khulna (in present-day Bangladesh) as Headmaster of St. Joseph's High School. The outbreak of World War II did not allow Fr. John to function long as Headmaster. From 1942 to 1945 he was officiating Chaplain to the Royal Air Force stationed at Jessore. Even after the soldiers left Jessore, Fr. John stayed on there till 1947, looking after the Christians of the surrounding areas. Towards the middle of 1947 Fr. John went home for his first vacation—after 18 years in India ! On his return he was appointed parish priest of Ranabondo in October 1947. He held this post for 18 years. In 1965 Fr. John was transferred to Berhampore in Murshidabad Dt. as parish priest. In 1968 he was appointed Prior of Bandel. Though sweet, it was a short stay. The following year he was appointed Asst. parish priest of Raghabpur, where he was of great help to Fr. Sergi. While there he also looked after the Christians of Barasat (Thaherpur). It was during this time he renovated the church of Barasat and built many houses for the poor of that village. In 1975 he was transferred to the Provincial House where he remained as Asst. parish priest of Auxilium parish, looking after the Christians of Motijhil, one of the biggest slums of Calcutta, and also helping in the ministry of confessions in the various communities of Calcutta. It is from this house that he was called to eternity.

Looking back upon the past, Fr. John would invariably come out with this expression : "I've been a missionary in Ranabondo for 18 years !" That seems to have been his identity card. He liked to be remembered as a missionary, a persevering missionary. In Ranabondo he had to put up with a world of inconveniences—lack of roads, electricity, water, without a proper parish house to live in. Add to these the poverty of the people around ! But those were the days he liked to remember. There he became a missionary to the core. He loved his people and spent his life for them ; his people, in return, loved him.

He did all he could to alleviate the suffering of the poor. First of all, he spent his time listening to them, even if he was not able to give solution to their problems. He knew that the basic need of his people was care, attention, and love. The little money he would gather from his benefactors was spent in being of service to the poor, in projects like house-building, the education of poor children, etc. Somehow the problems of the poor found an echo in his heart. Even if he was not able to do anything for them, he would at least send them away with a kind word.

He had a special love for the young people. He took great interest in the education of the poor boys. Because of his interest and initiative, today many children in our parish schools enjoy the benefit of sponsorship from Holland. One of his last efforts was to set up a fund for the Retreat-House of Bandel which would be able to subsidize retreats and courses for the poor youth, who otherwise would not have been able to benefit from such programmes.

Mary occupied a special place in his life. His Motto at ordination was "Ave Maria". In the last years the Rosary had become the pet object in his hands. Going out of the refectory after supper, he instinctively would pull out the Rosary from his pocket....it was time for reciting the Rosary. He would arrive in the chapel early for his practices of piety, and would wait for the community reciting the holy Rosary. He loved to distribute rosaries to people who visited him in the room. His place in the chapel was before the statue of Our Lady. He would personally make sure that every Saturday flowers were placed at the feet of Our Lady. When the Provincial requested him to come over to Bandel as prior in 1970, he wrote to him : "I would be the happiest man in the world, if I could spend the last years of my life under the mantle of Our Lady, dedicating my life to propagating her devotion." Mary rewarded him by calling him away on a Saturday — his last Mass was the Votive Mass of Our Lady !

By nature he was always cheerful and jovial and had a wonderful way of inspiring others to confidence. No doubt, he faced life with courage and with a smile. Everyone who asked him: "Fr. John, how are you?" would get the prompt reply "Fine !" Whatever may have happened to him he was just "Fine" ! His attitude towards people was one of deep respect and he had always a way of excusing even serious faults in others by saying : "....but, his intention was good !"

At table he would keep everyone roaring with laughter. Wit and humour was part of his life. There was never a dull moment. Fr. John would start off with something new when everyone felt the conversation was over.

Imagine the things he loved — children, flowers, birds, colours, sunshine. At 76 he had a taste for elegance — he knew how to match the colours of his pants and shirts ! His favourite colour was blue. He loved classical music — but if that went on too long, he would turn around and ask "How about something else ?" These things speak much about the life of the one whom we miss today.

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In the death of Fr. John Schilder, we have lost another great pioneer missionary. But, the inspiration that his life has been, remains. He now continues to speak in silence the same old message of zeal and missionary enthusiasm. The young missionaries of the province, in particular, have a light to look up to — one who lived his Salesian and missionary life with enthusiasm and joy.

As we continue to pray for our dear Fr. John Schilder that God may abundantly bless his soul, let us pray, dear confreres, for more Salesians, with the same zeal for others and with the same spirit of cheerfulness in the service of the Lord.

Yours ever in Don Bosco,
Fr. S. Alancheril
(*Rector*)

Data for Necrology: Fr. John Schilder, born 13 June 1907 Volendam (Holland) Died 30 July 1983 Calcutta (India), at the age of 76—52 of Profession and 45 years of Priesthood.