



RIP



Rev. Fr. George Stadler, sdb.
(1917 - 1986)

My Dear Confreres,

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord."

Just a year ago, on 12 December 1987, our beloved Fr. George Stadler left us for Heaven after much suffering. High blood pressure, diabetes, asthma and blindness which was almost total were his purgatory here on earth. To these physical ills must be added his great sorrow at not being able to return to India, his land of adoption. "I got the reply from the Government that no visa will be given to me. That was a shock to me. In fact, the biggest shock of my life. I love the tribals, especially the Garos, and I am sorry that I cannot work for them any more, but I can pray. My sacrifices also will be of some value...", wrote Fr. Stadler to the Provincial on 10 March 1986. These words express how grieved he was at not being able to come back to the land and the people he loved so dearly.

A PEEP INTO HIS LIFE

Fr. George Stadler, a salesian priest with a golden heart and a valiant missionary among the Garos, was born in Holzkirchen, Germany, on 28 March 1917. His parents were Marinus Stadler and Maria Eiler. Marinus was a God-fearing peasant of moderate means. Maria was a pious housewife. God blessed this good christian couple with six children, four boys and two girls. George was the eldest, and was brought up well by his parents till he entered the Aspirantate at the age of sixteen at Fulpmes Stubaital Tirol. He spent there nearly two years.

To the missions

As an eighteen year old youth he left his native Bavarian hills and came to India. Soon after his arrival he started his Novitiate

under the guidance of Fr. Joseph Foglia at Our Lady's House, Shillong. When this studentate was gutted by fire on that disastrous Good Friday, 10 April, 1936, the novices moved to Kurseong, thanks to the hospitality offered to them by the Jesuits. There, on December 8th, he made his first religious profession with complete trust in God and Mary, the Immaculate Help of Christians.

His philosophical studies were done in the peace and serenity of Sonada, near Darjeeling. He returned to Shillong for his practical training.

To the Internment Camps

When the second World War broke out cleric Stadler, being a German, was taken into custody by the British. First he stayed at Deoli and then he was taken to the concentration camp at Dehra Dun. Italian salesians, too, were interned since Italy joined the war on the side of the Germans. Cleric Stadler was naturally gifted with a large and generous heart. The following episode makes this amply clear :

In the German Camp the ration was quite sufficient. But beyond the wire-netting, instead, the Japanese prisoners had very little to eat, and they had to tighten their belts in a futile attempt to fight hunger. Unnoticed by the guards, Cl. Stadler used to send loaves of bread flying across the wire-netting to the Japanese. But on one occasion he missed the aim and one loaf fell at the feet of one of the guards. And the punishment... Stadler was given a week's strict imprisonment.

Philosophical and theological studies went on in the concentration camps. 20 September 1945 was an unforgettable day in the life of George Stadler. On that day he was ordained priest in the Concentration camp of Dehra Dun by Rt. Rev. Evangelista Vanni, O.F.M. Cap., the Archbishop of Agra.

Free At Last

At long last in 1946 he was able to leave the concentration camp and return to the Northeast. First he was sent to Damra

a new mission station for the Garos spread over the Garo Hills, and Kamrup and Goalpara Districts of Assam. Here in the company of Fr. Colzani Hubert, Fr. Stadler approached several Garo villages with the message of salvation; their efforts bore abundant fruit.

3 years later he left Damra to work as a touring missionary from Tura. From here he traversed the length and the breadth of Garo Hills proclaiming the Goodnews of salvation. His stay in Tura lasted 6 long years.

In 1956 he moved with Fr. J. Lopez to Bagmara. Here, besides visiting the impenetrable regions of the Attong, he built a beautiful two-storey building (school and boarding) for the boys from far away villages. Fr. Stadler was always on the move, and wherever he went he brought hope and affection. He was helpful to all in all their needs and especially at the time of sickness. In those days the dispensary and medicines were to be found only with the missionaries.

While administering medicine he was normally surrounded by a large crowd of patients with various ailments. On one occasion, it is said that, while giving an injection to one boy, and trying to listen to the complaints of another, he sent the needle right across the arm of the poor boy and sprayed the medicine on the wall of the hut he was in!! But then he consoled the boy by giving him a few vitamin pills!

Adventures of a valiant missionary

Fr. Stadler had many adventures during his long journeys through forests teeming with elephants, tigers, bears, serpents, etc. At times he had to walk for hours on end with out food. On one occasion he gets lost in the jungle and reaches a village at 10.00 p.m. The father of the family tells him, "Father, we are happy that you have come. But have some patience and wait while I go to the next village to look for some rice... The man returns an hour later. By the time the food is ready it is past mid-night. We are long before Vatican II and before the relaxation of the Eucharistic fast prescribed by Pius XII. "If I eat I won't be able to say Mass for these people... If I don't eat, I shall

faint and fall down before it is time for Mass. What is to be done?" mused Fr. Stadler. And then, like a good German, he takes the watch; the hands go back by one hour. He takes a good look at the watch once more with a triumphant smile playing at the corners of his lips and begins to eat. Thus the case is solved!

The following incident took place in 1958. Fr. Stadler starts out from Bagmara to go to Shillong for his annual retreat. He would have to cover 48 km on foot to reach Dalu from where he can catch a bus. But then he is fortunate, someone offers to take him by a bullock cart to Dalu. He nods his head in approval. He is alone with the driver. He sleeps during the first 15 km. When he wakes up to his great surprise he finds that the 'Super bullock cart' is parked in the middle of the Dareng river. The oxen unyoked from the cart are merrily grazing in Bangla Desh, and the driver?... well, he is away in the neighbouring village quenching his hunger and thirst. In the meantime, there is a down-pour in the neighbouring hills. The water in the river rises suddenly and there is the danger that the cart may be carried away by the current. Fr. Stadler considering the matter seriously decides to give up his luxury transport. He takes his bundle and walks and walks till he reaches Dalu.

In those days there were no roads in the Atong region but only the majestic river Simsang. Once on his return from Germany after holidays, Fr. Stadler brought with him a motor for his boat. "Father has brought a motor; the boat will not need oars any more", commented the Garos. The day of the inauguration is fixed. the whole of Bagmara turns out at the river to enjoy the sight... a motor-boat... something never seen before!

Fr. Stadler climbs down the hill and is ready for the inaugural trip. He is proud for his motor: 'Made in Germany.'

A gentle pull of the rope and the motor starts at once. The boat goes darting to the middle of the river. And lo! down goes the motor to the bottom of the river. Poor Fr. Stadler! What an embarrassment! Besides the whistling and hooting of the on-looking protestant boys there is the danger of the boat being swept away by the current into Bangla Desh. As he shouted

for help, the Garo boys, good at swimming (though not for tightening nuts and bolts !) pushed the boat to the bank and thus 'Captain Stadler' was saved ! The motor, once fished out of the river worked perfectly afterwards.

A missionary with a generous heart

Everyone knew Fr. Stadler as a very generous person. He was generosity personified. He was generous and kind to the point of being bluffed !

In Tura, one day a man brought him a beautiful cock for sale. Fr. Stadler buys it 'to help the man' and tells him, "Here is the money; now take the cock and put it in the chicken-run behind the house". The man goes away. Next week, too, Fr. Stadler buys a cock from the same man and asks him to put it in the chicken-run behind the house. The buying and selling goes on for four weeks. Finally Fr. George exclaimed, "But I think I have seen this cock more than once". He had already bought the same cock four times !

Many a time he would boast to his confreres that he had bluffed someone, and then with a gentle smile he would go on to tell his unbelieving confreres that he had managed to satisfy someone by giving half of what he asked for, and that was how he bluffed his importunate clients. Everyone knew that the maxim 'Ask and you will receive' could be applied perfectly to Fr. Stadler.

As a missionary in the out-lying villages of Garo Hills, he witnessed and personally experienced 'want', during the long years of preaching and catechising. He gave away everything he had — his time, his money, his health and his life.

He would go to visit his people even in remote villages which were quite difficult to reach. One day while on his way to a far away village, he had to cross a stream. A young man offered to carry him across the stream on his shoulders so that he would not have to remove his shoes. Carrying his heavy burden the youngster advanced upto the middle of the stream. Then his steps faltered and he let go his burden. That day

Fr. Stadler had a bath and a cooling that was not in his programme !

A pioneer missionary

Fr. Stadler was a pioneer missionary who brought the faith and the light of education to several Garo villages. He baptized over 10,000 Garos. He was careful to appoint teachers and catechists in every village he contacted so that the work he started would continue. From the village schools he brought many boys and girls to the mission centre. Today many of these are employed in different branches of civil administration, commerce, industry and transport. Many have thus become economically well off on account of the education they have received thanks to the efforts of Fr. Stadler.

A joyful missionary

He was jovial and witty. He could enjoy every joke played on him. He was able to take even an imprisonment of three days in a sporting manner. That was when he crossed over to East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh) in February 1960. After being released he wrote to the Provincial :

Very Rev. and dear Fr. Provincial,

This is my first letter after returning to freedom and beginning to lead again the life of an honest citizen. Through the intervention of the German Consul in Dacca, the case was dismissed on the spot because the Pakistani Government was guilty of breaking the agreement which exists between the two countries. No visa is required for me to enter Pakistan. Therefore the charge of illegal entry into Pakistan was null and void. Indirectly this worked also for my 5 companions. They were released on the day after, and on 11th February on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes we could start our journey back... I stayed 3 days in the

jail until Fr. Neff of Mymesing, by the order of His Grace the Archbishop came to take me out on bail..."

His missionary zeal knew no boundaries !

Dynamic... till the end

In 1965 Fr. George Stadler left Bagmara and returned to Tura. The year before a large number of Garos had fled from East Pakistan into India. Fr. Stadler lent a helping hand to the other pioneer, Fr. Julius Costa, in helping the more than seventy thousand Garo refugees distributed in the camps of Ronabath, Ganol and Rongram.

In 1971 the mission of Rongjeng was opened. In 1977 Fr. Stadler came to Rongjeng as Assistant Parish Priest. He was in-charge of developing the area of Mangsang. A new centre started coming up, a centre dedicated to the Apostle Paul. The Church of St. Paul at Mangsang was blessed on 29th May 1981.

Failing health

Years of hard missionary life gradually started telling on him. He became a diabetic, developed high blood pressure, and was suffering from bronchial asthma. Diabetes caused wounds on his hands and feet and considerably reduced his eye-sight.

Twice in 1981 he was in critical condition at Mangsang. Fr. Busolin had to take doctor and nurses and go to help him. With great difficulty Fr. Busolin convinced him to go to Germany for treatment. He didn't want to hear of it at first. When Fr. Busolin insisted, he asked, "Why ? You don't want to see me here anymore ?" "Come on George ! We have lived together for 32 years; and now I would like to see you strong and robust once more.", replied Fr. Busolin.

Last years in Germany

In 1982 Fr. George Stadler left for treatment to Germany. The battle against high blood pressure and diabetes which started

in India continued unabated in Germany, and his losses were considerable. He became totally blind in one eye and practically blind in the other.

Ever since his return to Germany, he was in and out of hospitals. After being discharged from the hospital at Krumbach, Fr. Stadler's physical condition deteriorated. So he was taken to a home for the aged at Burgkunstadt run by the Sisters of Mary Immaculate from India (Krishnagar).

"He can't see anything, in one eye he is nearly blind and in the other the clearness of his vision is only 20%. He can't take even a single step alone. He has to be guided all the time," wrote Fr. Richard Feuerlein of Munich to Fr. Provincial on April 22, 1986. The confreres of Munich took good care of Fr. Stadler and Fr. Stadler and Fr. Feuerlein kept us informed of his health condition from time to time.

Fr. Stadler longed to come back to India, to be with the people to whom he had endeared himself by his selfless service and extreme generosity. All those from India visited him in Germany saw him in tears as they bid him farewell. Every effort of his to come back to India with his shattered health was beset with difficulties. He wanted to come back to Garo Hills and die there.

In 1983, the Indian Government had issued him a visa. But unfortunately his eye ailment prevented him from making use of his visa before it expired. He applied for visa once again on 13th August, 1984. This time it proved difficult to get the visa.

He hoped to return to India with Fr. Provincial (Fr. John Kalapura) and with Fr. Vice-Provincial (Fr. Isaac Mattappilly) after the last General Chapter. When that plan failed, he thought he would make it with Msgr George Mamalassery after the 'ad limina' visit. But that plan, too, did not work out.

In June 1985, Bishop Mathai Kochuparambil who was on a tour of Europe and Fr. Paul Vadakumpadan who was studying misology in Rome paid a visit to Fr. Stadler. "They were here with Fr. Stadler for three days, and sure enough, it made him very happy, for, once again he enjoyed the loving company of his former Provincial and Fr. Paul", wrote Sr. Geraldine, SMI, who was in-charge of the home for the aged at Burgkunstadt.

Hoping against hope

Fr. Stadler hoped to travel to India in 1985 together with Fr. J. Marchesi who was coming to Northeast for the Golden Jubilee of his religious profession in September. Correspondence between Fr. Stadler, Fr. Marchesi, Fr. Feuerlein and Fr. Provincial went on for along time. Fr. Marchesi was prepared to accompany Fr. Stadler to India. But Providence had it otherwise, and we all hoped against hope.

By May 1986, Fr. Stadler had given up all hope of returning to India on account of his declining health and difficulties in getting the visa.

When there was no more hope of his returning to India, Fr. Stadler finally decided to move nearer to his home. So, on September 11, 1986, he was brought to Caritas Altenheim, in Peissenburg.

His stay there, made comfortable by his friends and relatives, lasted just 3 months. Then we received the sad news of his death. How we had wished that he would return to India, return to us ! He had completed his mission here on earth, perfecting it in the purifying fire of suffering and by the pain of separation from those for whom he lived ! He died on 12th December, 1986.

Funeral

The funeral took place on December 16. A great number of salesians, other religious and priests took part in it. Almost all the inhabitants of his home village participated in the last rites paying homage to a great missionary of whom they could, indeed, be proud. His mortal remains were laid to rest in the priests' grave at Altenau near Rottenbuch. Fr. Richard Feuerlein, the former Provincial of the South German Province, who knew Fr. Stadler very well, and who looked after him with great dedication during his illness, delivered the funeral oration.

Rev. Fr. August Brecheisen, the Provincial of South German Province and the confreres there did a lot for Fr. Stadler during his illness, treatment and at his death. Their kindness towards

him made up for our absence from his side. We shall remain ever grateful to them for their solidarity and generosity. Even the expenses incurred were written off as a donation to our Province !

CONCLUSION

Tears were shed here on earth at the death of this tireless messenger of the Good News. But as he passed across the pearly gates leading to heavenly glory, the echoes and re-echoes of loud and joyous acclamations must have filled the courts of heaven. Fr. Stadler, himself a musician, must have been thrilled to hear divine voices singing "Jisuna Rasong" (praised be Jesus) !

May the Gospel bear abundant fruit in the hearts of those who heard it from the lips of Fr. Stadler, and in the hearts of their posterity. May many generous young men and women from Garo Hills, inspired by his example, come forward to dedicate themselves to God's service. Amen.

Guwahati
12 December 1987

Fr. JOHN KALAPURA, SDB.
Provincial

Data for Necrology :

FR. GEORGE STADLER

Born : 28.03.1917, Holzkirchen, Germany

Professed : 08.12.1936

Ordained : 20.09.1945

Died : 12.12.1986, Peissenburg, Germany
